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THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1933-5

PAUL STEVEN CORTHORN

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

SEPTEMBER 1999



23 MAY 2000

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This thesis examines the divisions over foreign policy that emerged within the Labour movement from 1933, and culminated in a debate between its leaders at the 1935 party conference. In a steadily worsening international environment, pacifists and the Left had tentatively begun to develop influential critiques of the party line, which through the efforts of Henderson, Dalton, Attlee, Bevin and Citrine was becoming increasingly committed to a sanctionist League of Nations. However, it was only in the summer of 1935, with Mussolini's impending invasion of Abyssinia, that the pacifists, led by Lansbury and Ponsonby, the leaders of the Labour party in the two Houses of Parliament, and the leftist Socialist League, led by Cripps, openly began to voice their dissent from the party line.

In discussing the various dimensions of this debate, this thesis draws on a wider range of source material than previous accounts of Labour's foreign policy in these years. In addition to the frequently consulted published material, it makes extensive use of private records – those of the Labour party itself, the TUC and also of key individuals.

This thesis offers a substantial revision of the established literature, which has tended to overlook the significance of the Labour party's debates over the imposition of sanctions in 1935. It argues that the way in which these intra-party conflicts were resolved at the 1935 party conference placed the movement firmly behind armed collective security. In doing so it re-established Labour's political credibility and facilitated its inclusion in Churchill's wartime government.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to my supervisor, Dr Philip Williamson, for the invaluable advice and encouragement he has given me during the writing of this thesis. I am obliged to the University of Durham History Department for providing funds to facilitate research. I would also like to thank my parents for their abiding faith in me.

ABBREVIATIONS AND CONVENTIONS

Abbreviations

ACIQ	Advisory Committee on International Questions
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
FOR	Fellowship of Reconciliation
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions
ILP	Independent Labour Party
LNU	League of Nations Union
<i>LPACR</i>	<i>Labour Party Annual Conference Report</i>
LRC	Labour Representative Committee
LSI	Labour and Socialist International
NCF	No Conscription Fellowship
NCL	National Council of Labour
NEC	National Executive Committee
NJC	National Joint Council
NMWM	No More War Movement
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
SSIP	Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda
TUC	Trades Union Congress
<i>TUCAR</i>	<i>Trades Union Congress Annual Report</i>

Conventions

All places of publication are London unless otherwise stated. 'Dalton diary' refers to the unpublished Hugh Dalton diary in the British Library of Political and Economic Science.

INTRODUCTION

The decision of Mussolini to invade Abyssinia in 1935 provoked deep divisions on foreign policy within the Labour movement and a dramatic crisis in the Labour party's political leadership. The way in which this crisis was resolved had huge implications for the policy and fortunes of the Labour movement for the rest of the 1930s, and into the 1940s. In the event, the majority of the movement followed the lead given by Hugh Dalton, Clement Attlee, Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine, and accepted that the member states of the League of Nations should be prepared to use military as well as economic and financial sanctions against Italy. Nevertheless, the arguments advanced by pacifists and those on the Left who opposed this line could not be easily dismissed. Above all this was because they echoed themes of peace and anti-capitalism with which many in the movement sympathised. It was also because the movement's official leaders and foremost parliamentary figures led these dissenting minorities. The party's most prominent pacifist – the septuagenarian George Lansbury – was also its leader. His fellow pacifist, Arthur Ponsonby, led the Labour party in the House of Lords. The leftist critique came from the Socialist League, led by Sir Stafford Cripps – another prominent figure in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), and widely regarded as a future leader of the party.

These factions had been formulating their opposing positions since 1933, under the pressure of a deteriorating international environment, especially the rise of Nazism in Germany. Intra-party conflict, however, became intense only in the late summer of 1935. It then centred on the contentious question of interpretation of Article XVI of the League Covenant. This described the range of different sanctions



that the League might use against an aggressor nation, but did not define the circumstances in which each might be invoked. Moreover, with the League's great commitment to disarmament many people (not just in the Labour party) had thought that military sanctions were redundant, and had emphasised instead 'moral' or economic sanctions. Article XVI detailed how member states would be bound to prohibit 'all intercourse between their nationals and the nations of the Covenant-breaking state' as well as to sever 'all trade and financial relations'. Now, however, Dalton, Bevin, Citrine and Attlee were arguing forthrightly that in the last resort Article XVI involved the use of military sanctions. For it had also stated that in case of aggression, it was 'the duty of the Council...to recommend...what effective military, naval or air force the members of the League shall severally contribute to the armed forces to be used to protect the covenant of the League'.¹ The dispute culminated in a debate at the 1935 party conference – literally on the eve of the Italian attack on Abyssinia – which was one of the most heated and dramatic so far experienced.

The Labour party is particularly prone to divisions over foreign policy. Since the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) joined together to form the Labour Representative Committee (LRC) in 1900, it has been a loose coalition of different interests, opinions and institutions held together by a shared commitment to secure domestic social and economic improvement. For the most part differences over foreign policy have been tolerated for the sake of progress towards these domestic ends. It has only been at times of great international crises, when foreign policy has become central to political debate, that the opposing foreign-

¹ The text of Article XVI of the League Covenant can be found in *LPACR*, 1935, p. 322.

policy traditions within the party, deeply held but often submerged, have come to the fore. The Abyssinian conflict precipitated major disagreements between them in much the same way as the outbreak of the Great War had done, and as the growing Cold War crisis would do during the 1950s.

The parallels between 1935 and 1914 are especially striking. On both occasions the party leader - MacDonald in 1914 and Lansbury in 1935 - found themselves seriously at odds with the dominant line supported by the NEC and the trade unions. In 1914 the majority of the party had followed Arthur Henderson's lead and readily backed the British war effort, later joining the wartime coalition governments of Asquith and Lloyd George. In contrast, MacDonald, inspired by his liberal-radical international beliefs, had resigned the party chairmanship in August 1914 because he was unwilling to support the declaration of war and vote for the government's war credits.² He was joined in dissent from the party line by many of the socialists in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) as well as by pacifists, such as Lansbury, who subsequently devoted their energies to organising a range of pacifist societies, most notably the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the No Conscription Fellowship (NCF).³ Similarly, divisions within the party emerged in 1951 when, with the onset of the Korean War, the Labour government decided to follow a course urged by Attlee and Hugh Gaitskell and introduce a programme of rearmament. This prompted the Left's foremost spokesmen, Aneurin Bevan and Harold Wilson, to resign from the Cabinet. The debate continued into the following year, with the Bevanite line supported in the Commons not only by left-wingers such as Michael Foot, but also by pacifists.

² D.Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (1977), ch. 9.

The debate over foreign policy in 1935 came at a particularly crucial juncture for the Labour party. In 1931 the second Labour government had sensationally fallen apart, unable to agree how to manage a financial crisis. Afterwards it was considered vital that the party should work together to develop a range of coherent policies if the electoral credibility lost when MacDonald had defected to form a National government was to be regained. In the years after 1933, however, with an improvement in the general economic climate and the rise of Hitler, foreign policy had steadily emerged as the central political issue, and created disagreement within the movement. With a general election due before November 1936 but widely expected well before then, there was a pressing need for the party to reconcile its differences about the conduct of foreign affairs.

It is clear that by May 1940 the Labour party had re-established its political respectability through its new stance on foreign policy. The party was now strongly represented in Churchill's wartime coalition, which had replaced Chamberlain's discredited administration. However, the importance of the outcome of Labour's debates in 1935 in facilitating this shift is a matter of contention. The earliest accounts – both 'Cato's' fierce polemic *Guilty Men* and G.D.H.Cole's *A History of the Labour Party since 1914* – considered these events to have been very significant. Although it was a distinctly political work, the perspectives of 'Cato' in 1940 helped shape much historical opinion for the next 20 years. So far as the Labour party was concerned, it claimed that the debate over the imposition of sanctions against Mussolini marked the decisive turning point in its political rejuvenation. Its co-authors, Michael Foot, Peter Howard and Frank Owen were keen to absolve the Labour party of any blame for the

³ M.Ceadel, *Pacifism in Great Britain 1914-45: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford, 1980), pp.32-7.

failure to re-arm Britain in a faster and more effective way. Their central points were that this failure had led directly to the retreat from Dunkirk, and that MacDonald, Baldwin and particularly Chamberlain were responsible. It contended that between 1933 and 1935 Labour had undergone 'a genuine party revolution' that took it from a position where it favoured a general strike in the event of Britain going to war to one where it was committed to confronting Hitler 'with his own weapons'. It argued that after the 1935 party conference, due mainly to the efforts of Bevin, the party was prepared 'to challenge an Aggressor State even if it meant War' and, inaccurately, that thereafter it 'was officially pledged to armaments every whit as much as the government'.⁴

G.D.H.Cole's *A History of the Labour Party From 1914* argued that the 'whole problem of Labour's international policy came to a head at the Brighton conference' in 1935. He qualified the importance of the outcome by stating that the 'ambiguity of Labour foreign policy' arising from the forces of pacifism and of leftist dissent within the party ranks 'persisted to some extent right up to the Munich crisis'. Nevertheless he held that 1935 was a critical juncture in this evolutionary process, because continuously thereafter 'those who saw the sheer necessity of getting the arms with which to fight the fascists if necessity arose were gaining ground'.⁵

However, subsequent accounts tended to play down the significance of the resolution of Labour party's internal disputes in 1935, in ways that have since shaped interpretation of the period. C.L.Mowat's *Britain Between the Wars* argued that so far as its foreign policy was concerned, the Labour party did not 'come to a clear-cut decision' in 1935. He correctly noted that until 1937 the PLP rather confusingly

⁴ 'Cato', *Guilty Men* (1940), pp. 29-32.

continued to oppose the National government's rearmament measures. But he argued more contentiously that it was not until March 1939, when a National Council of Labour (NCL) circular stated that rearmament was 'necessary...in the interests of self-defence alone', that the party explicitly endorsed armed security – a course they had only tentatively supported after Munich.⁶

A.J.P. Taylor's *The Trouble Makers* similarly contended that when 'the excitement over Abyssinia died away, it became clear that Labour had failed to make the big jump'. His reasons for holding such a view were, however, different from those of Mowat. He asserted that thereafter the party's policy had 'two contradictory aspects' – a belief that Hitler had to be confronted through an armed alliance, but a refusal to countenance this course so long as the National government remained in power. He contended that the difference between moderates, such as Attlee, and the leftists, such as Cripps, was 'only in emphasis', and that resolutions submitted to the party conference in 1936 and 1937 failed to clarify Labour's position. He acknowledged that after July 1937 the PLP did not vote against the Service Estimates, but pointedly added that it voted against conscription in April 1939. The Labour party, according to Taylor's interpretation, did not resolve its internal contradictions and come to stand firmly behind armed security until May 1940. One conceptual development in his work is of considerable value to any study of Labour's foreign policy in the 1930s whatever view is taken of his wider assertions; his neat differentiation, later developed by Martin Ceadel, between pacifism and *pacificism*. Pacifism is the belief, held by a section of the Labour party, that war is always wrong,

⁵ G.D.H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914* (1948), pp. 305-8, 321.

⁶ C.L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (1955), pp. 550-3, 632.

and *pacifism* is the Labour party's official position, which holds the preservation of peace as an overriding priority, but accepts that war might sometimes be necessary.⁷

The second volume of Dalton's memoirs, *The Fateful Years* - based on the diaries he kept for most of his political career - records his contemporary belief that the crucial foreign-policy juncture came in July 1937. This was after the success of his own momentous efforts to convince the PLP to switch from voting against to abstaining on the National government's Arms Estimates, so in effect giving tacit approval to British rearmament.⁸

Alan Bullock's *Life and Times of Ernest Bevin* rightly portrays Labour's debate over sanctions in 1935 as part of the wider battle between the party's utopian left wing, permeated with strands of pacifism and anti-capitalism, and its 'realistic' right wing. In this context, however, he does not regard 1935 as any kind of turning point. Indeed, he stresses that 'Spain, appeasement, rearmament, conscription, each revived the debate in different forms'.⁹

In his *A Short History of the Labour Party* Henry Pelling, the leading Labour historian after Cole, added an important institutional dimension. He argued that the critical transition for the Labour party occurred in the years immediately following the 1931 crisis, when the TUC General Council, under the control of Bevin and Citrine, 'moved in to take the helm' of the movement. Thereafter they worked through the National Joint Council (NJC), which had been reconstituted with an in-built trade union majority, and began to impress their views on the party. In the dire international

⁷ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy 1792-1939* (1957), pp. 189-93. Ceadel, *Pacifism*, esp. ch. 1. Taylor repeated his argument that so far as Labour's foreign policy was concerned, after October 1935 'nothing was changed', in A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (Oxford, 1965), p. 382.

⁸ H. Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-45* (1957), pp. 51, 133-4.

situation of the 1930s they soon came to press for armed collective security, which appealed to their 'practical view of foreign affairs based upon their industrial experience'. In Pelling's interpretation the endorsement of a sanctionist League policy in October 1935, and indeed the decision to cease opposition to British rearmament in July 1937, was primarily significant because they marked the General Council's growing assertion of control over the party.¹⁰

J.F.Naylor's *Labour's International Policy* is the only full-scale coverage of Labour's foreign policy in the 1930s. It offers more descriptive detail of the growing debate over foreign policy between 1933 and 1935 than can be found in other accounts, but does not consider them pivotal to the formation of Labour's later stance. Naylor concludes that 1935 was 'a watershed' but only in the limited sense that it saw 'the exorcising of purely pacifist doctrines from official Labour leadership as well as from policy for the balance of the decade'. Instead, he sees the 'decisive turning-point' occurring at the 1937 Labour party conference with the acceptance of a policy document, *International Policy and Defence*, formalising the support for British rearmament, and with the conclusive defeat of Cripps's demands for a United Front.¹¹

Maurice Cowling's *The Impact of Hitler* tentatively offered a revision of the orthodoxy, which by stressing subsequent events had implicitly reduced the importance of Labour's 1935 debates over the imposition of sanctions against Italy. Having stated how foreign policy enabled the party to gain 'respectability', Cowling argued that in 1935 Labour underwent 'an upheaval' which 'put the party on one

⁹ A.Bullock, *Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Volume I: Trade Union Leader 1881-40* (1960), ch. 20, esp. pp. 547-9.

¹⁰ H.Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party* (1961), ch. 5.

¹¹ J.F.Naylor, *Labour's International Policy: The Labour Party in the 1930s* (1969), chs. 3,4, esp. pp. 109-11, ch. 6, esp. 202-7.

rather than the other of the foreign-policy forks over which it had been hovering in the previous year'. However, this was very much a subsidiary point in a book whose main argument is that the debates over foreign policy in these years can only be understood in relation to the political objectives of politicians - a point he perceptively applied to intra-party struggles as well as to the broader canvass of inter-party conflict.¹²

Since Cowling's contribution, however, the significance of the Labour party's debates over Abyssinia has not been seriously discussed and reassessed. A clearer understanding of the importance of these intra-party debates on foreign policy would have assisted one of the most notable studies of the Labour party in the 1930s – Ben Pimlott's *Labour and the Left*. This book is implicitly dismissive of Labour's eventual attainment of respectability in the late 1930s, and contends that the party actually missed a great opportunity to attain power in these years. He asserts that in early 1938 the Labour leadership was so preoccupied with checking its own left wing that it failed to grasp the chance to lead a broad opposition, involving the dissident Conservatives - Churchill, Amery and Eden as well as Liberals, such as Sinclair - against the inadequacies of Chamberlain's foreign policy. He argues that the loose alliance, which Labour belatedly and tentatively began to forge with these factions after Munich in autumn 1938, could have been made into an actual coalition government earlier in 1938 if the Labour party had been more receptive to the idea of a Popular Front. However, at this stage, argues Pimlott, the party leadership was opposed to the idea because its most enthusiastic supporter within the party was the troublesome leftist Cripps. In the previous year Cripps had vigorously supported the creation of a United Front – an anti-fascist alliance comprising just Labour, the ILP

¹² M. Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and Policy 1933-40* (Cambridge, 1975), esp. pp.

and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) – which the party leadership had opposed, perceiving it as an opportunity for the Communists to infiltrate the Labour party. When, therefore, he began to advocate a wider alliance, the new line was regarded by many as simply another Communist ploy. Yet despite Pimlott's emphasis on the Labour party's opportunities in the late 1930s, his otherwise comprehensive study does not examine the process by which it had come to hold views on foreign policy so similar to those of the Conservative and Liberal anti-appeasers that an alliance was even a possibility.¹³

There have been a number of biographies written in the last 20 years on the leading figures in the Labour party's 1935 debates. Naturally enough they all consider the impact of the events on their subjects, but following the established literature they fail to investigate the wider implications of the decision reached at the party conference.¹⁴ By far the most noteworthy of these recent biographies is Pimlott's study of *Hugh Dalton*. Here Pimlott does elaborate on the process by which Labour established a credible position on foreign policy. Above all, however, he is keen to portray Dalton as the architect of Labour's transition from being 'essentially a pacifist party' in 1933, to urging 'collective security through the League of Nations' and bitterly opposing Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement by the end of 1937. Following the view taken by Dalton in his diary and memoirs, therefore, Pimlott argues that the decisive 'turning point' was July 1937 when Dalton managed to

81-4.

¹³ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge, 1977), esp. pp. 4-6

¹⁴ See, for instance, K. Harris, *Attlee* (1982), pp. 119-20; J. Schneer, *George Lansbury* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 157-76; C. Bryant, *Stafford Cripps: The First Modern Chancellor* (1997), pp. 124-7.

convince the PLP to abstain on the Service Estimates, thus giving approval to the national government's rearmament programme.¹⁵

One of the most valuable considerations of Labour's 1935 debates is to be found in John Shepherd's little-known article 'Labour and the Trade Unions'. This analyses the events leading to the bitter confrontation between Lansbury and Bevin at the 1935 party conference. In doing so it gives a sense of the dramatic and passionate nature of the debate, and convincingly argues that in 1935 the forces of pacifism within the Labour party were overwhelmingly defeated. However, the limited scope of his article does not provide him with the opportunity to question whether 1935 might have been a climacteric for Labour in any wider sense.¹⁶

A thorough examination of the debates over the imposition of sanctions against Italy and their significance has yet to be undertaken. The implicit consensus in the existing literature is such that the various different aspects of these debates have been little studied, and their significance diminished in comparison to later developments. This orthodox emphasis remains in general works on the Labour party, notably Andrew Thorpe's *A History of the British Labour Party*.¹⁷ There has been no consideration of these events in the depth that Tom Buchanan's *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* has covered a slightly later period.¹⁸ There is, therefore, a pressing need for a re-evaluation of the intra-party dispute over League sanctions.

¹⁵ B.Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (1985), ch. 15, esp. pp. 225, 242.

¹⁶ J.Shepherd, 'Labour and the Trade Unions: George Lansbury, Ernest Bevin and the leadership Crisis of 1935', in C.Wrigley and J.Shepherd (eds.), *On the Move* (1991), p.204-230.

¹⁷ A. Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (1997), ch. 4.

¹⁸ T.Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge, 1992).

Chapter one explains the context in which these debates were conducted. It shows how the Labour party had long based its foreign policy on the League of Nations without seriously considering in what ways this international organisation would work to check aggression. The chapter also describes the institutional tensions within the party after 1931, which influenced the character of the 1935 debates. Chapters two, three and four then analyse, in turn, the arguments developed since 1933 by the leaders of the three feuding factions – pacifists, the Socialist League, and those advocating a sanctionist League. Above all they explain how the pressures of both international events and domestic politics contrived to ensure that, when the Italian-Abyssinian crisis provided the spark, a passionate debate ensued.

This thesis is based on a wider range of source material than was available for the last substantial study of Labour's foreign policy in the 1930s, that of Naylor in the 1960s. His core materials were published sources: the *Trades Union Congress Annual Reports* and *Labour Party Annual Conference Reports*, and the parliamentary speeches reported in *Hansard*. By themselves these tend to give the impression that the debate was solely one about policy. More recently available private records - the NEC, NJC/NCL and TUC General Council minutes - have made it possible not just to explain the evolution of the sanctionist League policy more fully, but also to define the roles of the leading individuals concerned with more precision. In this respect these private records suggest an important revision of the established orthodoxy. They reveal Henderson as the chief architect of a sanctionist League policy, with Dalton, Citrine, Bevin and Attlee not – as existing accounts assume - the prime movers but the able lieutenants, only assuming the mantle at a relatively late stage. Moreover, a range of private paper collections has, in contrast to Naylor's account, provided the basis for

discussion of the political struggles that were taking place, as different individuals and bodies fought to secure adoption of their policies in order to increase their influence within the party. The Dalton papers containing his diary are undoubtedly the best example here, with their abundant references to his growing feud with Cripps.

Chapter five then brings together all these themes and individuals, and analyses how the debate was finally resolved at the 1935 party conference. The conclusion offers reflections on the larger question posed in the thesis: How important was the shift in Labour's foreign policy that followed the conference debate on 'Italy and Abyssinia' in re-establishing Labour's political credibility?

CHAPTER ONE

THE BACKGROUND

In the years from the end of the Great War until the Abyssinian crisis Labour's foreign policy factions co-existed in relative harmony. Initially the movement was united in its repudiation of the Versailles Settlement, and in its tentative endorsement of the League of Nations. From the mid 1920s, however, differences of emphasis emerged. The party leadership, guided by Henderson, became firmly committed to the League of Nations as the lynch pin of its foreign policy. Pacifists and the Left did not place much faith in the League and never wholeheartedly embraced the party's new stance. Nevertheless, in the peaceful international climate that pervaded Europe at this time, they accepted it because they were able to avoid consideration of the extent of the powers that might be given to the League in the event of military aggression. Although the international environment deteriorated dramatically in 1931-2 with the crisis in Manchuria, the movement's delicate agreement on foreign affairs remained intact. For in the aftermath of the 1931 financial and political crisis, the Labour movement was deeply preoccupied with matters of domestic economic and social policy. With the rise of Hitler in 1933-4 divisions did begin to emerge within the movement. Henderson now sought to strengthen the party's commitment to League sanctions – economic and military – to check aggression. In response the Socialist League objected to endowing the 'capitalist' League of Nations with any such powers. Yet until the Abyssinian crisis began to loom large, intra-party discord over foreign policy remained largely submerged.

By 1918 the divisions that had been prominent earlier in the Great War had gradually healed, as the party united behind support for the creation of a League of Nations. The idea of a League provided a focus for the widespread hopes of a better future that had been stimulated by the unprecedented suffering of the Great War. It was seen as a means of reforming international relations, of superseding the 'Old Diplomacy' with its secret diplomacy and systems of alliance, and of creating permanent international peace. The efforts of both MacDonald and Henderson ensured that the Labour party endorsed the concept of a League of Nations at a special conference in December 1917.¹ The party's 1918 programme *Labour and the New Social Order* then demanded that 'a Universal League or Society of Nations' be established 'as a part of the Treaty of Peace'.²

However, as the precise form of the League of Nations emerged from the Versailles Peace Conference, MacDonald and Henderson, at another special conference in April 1919, outlined an approach they were to take over the next few years. They gave only conditional endorsement to the League. They praised the broad principles of its covenant or constitution - the aspirations to prevent future wars by the peaceful settlement of international disputes, to promote disarmament, to supervise mandated territories and to foster habits of international co-operation in the economic and social sphere. They also accepted the provisions under which members in dispute with one another were obliged to refer their differences to one of three processes provided by the League: to the Permanent Court of International Justice, to arbitration, or to enquiry by the League Council. At this stage no debate arose over Article XVI of the Covenant, which became the subject of much dispute in the mid-1930s. However,

¹ See Marquand, *MacDonald*, pp. 218-222; C. Wrigley, *Arthur Henderson* (Cardiff, 1990), pp. 112-125.

MacDonald and Henderson strongly criticised the exclusion of Germany and the other defeated countries from membership of the League.³

After the publication of the Versailles settlement their criticism intensified. They now contended that the League's foremost flaw was its connection to a settlement which had failed to meet the expectations of a just peace raised by Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points and embraced by most liberal and radical opinion. It seemed as though the wishes of the more narrowly nationalistic French premier, Georges Clemenceau, and of an ultra-patriotic Lloyd George had often prevailed at the Conference. As Henderson explained, the League was committed to preserve a status quo in which Germany was unilaterally disarmed, stripped of its colonies as well as certain territories in Europe, and forced to pay a level of reparations expected to be so high that it would probably ruin its own, and dampen the entire European, economy.⁴

The party leadership's stance was acceptable to different strands of opinion in the party, not just to the great body that had supported Britain's involvement in the War, but also to pacifists and left wingers. Lansbury, already one of Labour's most prominent pacifists, derived his pacifism and indeed his socialism from his Anglican Christian faith. Characteristically during the Great War he had joined the FOR which had argued that the spirit of God's teaching on love and redemption was contrary to war.⁵ Now, however, he found that his condemnation of the Versailles Treaty as a

² *Labour and the New Social Order* (1918), p.23.

³ *LPACR*, 1919, p.26, quoted in H.R. Winkler, *Paths Not Taken: British Labour and International Policy in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill, 1994), pp. 38-9. Chs. 2 and 3 of this book explain in detail how the Labour party conditionally endorsed the League in the years following Versailles.

⁴ A. Henderson, *The Peace Terms* (1919), pp.6-9.

⁵ Ceadel, *Pacifism*, p.36.

'peace of hate'⁶ was perfectly consistent with the party's attitude. His fellow pacifist Ponsonby had defected from the Liberal to the Labour party during the Great War, believing that its approach to foreign affairs was more akin to his own. He held that moral, rather than physical, force should form the basis of international authority.⁷ At this time, however, he too was comfortably able to echo the sentiments of his new party in suggesting that while the League should not be dismissed out of hand, it was a caricature of the original idea.⁸ Those on the left – mainly belonging to the ILP – were more vehement in their criticism of the peace settlement than most of the party. Following the lead of H.N.Brailsford, one of the foremost leftist writers, they argued that it cruelly suppressed Germany while bolstering the position of France to such an extent that it might soon be able to dominate the continent of Europe. Yet, even though they made the logical link and asserted that the League of Nations would be used by capitalist and imperialist Britain and France to preserve this status quo, at this stage they still remained within the Labour fold.⁹

During the 1920s the Labour leadership gradually moved from a position where they only tentatively supported the League towards a much more positive endorsement of the fledgling international organisation. As the party faced the prospect of actually holding office Henderson, working closely with the Advisory Committee for International Questions (ACIQ), argued that the League should be made the pivot of Labour's foreign policy, and the means of achieving disarmament. The ACIQ had been created in May 1918 as part of Henderson's reforms of the party structure. It was

⁶ *Daily Herald*, 28 June 1919, quoted in H.R.Winkler, *Paths Not Taken*, p.54.

⁷ 'The Sanction behind a League of Nations', *War and Peace*, September 1918; UDC Pamphlet 41a, 'The Covenant of the League of Nations: An Analysis with full text, (1920), quoted in Jones, *Ponsonby*, p. 164.

⁸ Winkler, *Paths Not Taken*, p.72.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 71. Brailsford's views found their fullest expression in H.N.Brailsford, *After the Peace* (1920).

to work on behalf of the NEC and 'consider, report and advise upon international policy and all questions of an international character, and to watch and advise upon current international developments'.¹⁰ Its most prominent members – Leonard Woolf and Philip Noel-Baker – were League enthusiasts. Woolf, the committee's secretary, had been an early advocate of a League, and wrote an important study of the matter in 1916 entitled *International Government*.¹¹ Noel-Baker had been part of Lord Cecil's delegation at Paris in 1919 that had negotiated the creation of the League, was a member of the Executive Committee of the League of Nations Union (LNU), and had worked in its Secretariat in the early 1920s.¹² Under their influence, as early as 1922, in *Labour and Foreign Affairs*, Henderson contended that by establishing definite procedures to ensure the implementation of the League's arbitration mechanisms a sense of international security could be fostered which would, in turn, allow measures of disarmament to be effected.¹³ In 1924 when the Labour party formed its first government, albeit a minority one, MacDonald as prime minister decided to act as his own foreign secretary. Henderson, however, continued to dominate on League of Nations issues. As leader of the British delegation at the League Council meeting in September he largely shaped the Geneva Protocol.¹⁴

The Protocol provided that the League's compulsory arbitration mechanisms be backed by a commitment by League members to impose sanctions against any aggressor. States that refused to submit to arbitration when required to do so by the League Council, or which refused to abide by its decision, were to be regarded as

¹⁰ Quoted in Winkler, *Paths Not Taken*, p. 24.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 21.

¹² D.J. Whittaker, *Fighter for Peace: Philip Noel-Baker* (York, 1989), pp. 31, 44.

¹³ A. Henderson, *Labour and Foreign Affairs* (1922), p.9.

aggressors. At its own discretion the Council could then apply the range of sanctions provided for in Article XVI of the Covenant. Crucially, though, the acceptance of these provisions was linked to the achievement of a definite measure of disarmament. A Disarmament Conference was to be held in June 1925, and it was carefully emphasised that the Protocol would not come into force until it had successfully concluded. However, the Protocol was rejected in March 1925 by the Conservative government, which subsequently replaced it with the Locarno Treaty – a regional security pact, existing outside the League and negotiated without its involvement. Nevertheless, Henderson's advocacy of the Protocol's underlying principles – arbitration, security and disarmament - continued unabated.¹⁵

Henderson's approach found further expression in Labour's 1928 programme *Labour and the Nation*. This pledged that a Labour government would use the League's provision for arbitration, underpinned by pooled security, to encourage disarmament.¹⁶ As foreign secretary in MacDonald's second minority Labour government of 1929-31, Henderson worked to make a reality of this rhetorical commitment. True to the 1928 programme, at the Tenth Assembly of the League of Nations in September 1929, he signed the 'Optional Clause' of the League Covenant, thereby extending the jurisdiction of the Permanent Court of International Justice to all legal disputes involving Great Britain. On 21 May 1931 he signed the 'General Act of Arbitration, Conciliation and Judicial Settlement' which took the application of arbitration beyond cases which could be settled by international law to other classes of

¹⁴ The importance of Henderson in gradually moving the party towards this kind of realistic and workable foreign policy is the underlying theme of Winkler, *Paths Not Taken*. See in particular ch. 5 for a discussion of the first Labour government.

¹⁵ Ibid, ch. 6.

¹⁶ *Labour and the Nation* (1928), pp.41-2

dispute, with the overall intention of avoiding a resort to war. He had done much to advance the jurisdiction and credibility of the League – something that the League delegates recognised when, in May 1931, they unanimously invited him to preside over the world's first Disarmament Conference when this opened in February 1932.

Pacifists and the Left were able to accept the direction in which Henderson was taking the party's foreign policy because the international environment was increasingly favourable. At the time the Locarno Treaty of 1925 had been criticised by Labour as an inadequate defensive arrangement typifying the Conservatives' purely nominal support for the League, but it had since become the undoubted symbol for a period of international calm. The Dawes Plan of 1924, which provided Germany with generous American loans, had gone some way to solving the difficulties over reparations. Franco-German trade had increased considerably and Germany, under the guidance of Streseman, had in 1926 been allowed to join the League. The Kellogg Pact of August 1928 even went so far as to commit the 14 signatory countries, including Britain, to the high-minded objective of outlawing war. In this climate pacifists in the Labour party were able to ignore the potential extent of the economic, and possibly military sanctions, which, under Article XVI of the Covenant, the League could use to try and compel submission to its arbitration procedures.

Henderson himself recognised that there might be a need for an ultimate reliance on force within the League's provision for sanctions. 'Force', he told his Burnley constituents on 12 October 1924, 'should be used to make the decisions effective, if sanity, reason, right and justice failed and these sanctions had to be employed'. However, in an improving international climate - perhaps even out of sensitivity to pacifist sentiment in the party - he had refrained from giving these views

wide currency.¹⁷ MacDonald may have further relieved pacifist anxieties. He was instinctively sceptical of the value of legalistic formulae and precise obligations to the successful operation of the League, and played down their significance to a far greater extent than Henderson. He believed that security could only be achieved by improving the international weather.¹⁸ This conviction led him to write that he considered the provision of sanctions in the Geneva Protocol as nothing more than 'a harmless drug to soothe the nerves'.¹⁹ It also prompted him to overrule Henderson at the London Naval Conference in summer 1930 and refuse to provide the tightly-defined security guarantees that the French demanded as a precondition to disarmament.²⁰

In any case, pacifists tacitly accepted the party leadership's League policy with its emphasis on multilateral disarmament - even though disarmament of the unilateral variety was the logical corollary of their beliefs. In 1921 Lansbury had been a founder member of the No More War Movement (NMWM), whose membership pledge asserted emphatically that since all war was 'wrong' the arming of any state was 'treason to the spiritual unity of mankind'.²¹ Nevertheless, as First Commissioner of Works and cabinet member in the 1929-31 government he was collectively responsible for the government's policy on the League and disarmament.²² Ponsonby is a still more interesting case. As Under Secretary at the Foreign Office in 1924, he had been unhappy with the implication of the Geneva Protocol that progress towards

¹⁷ Winkler, *Paths Not Taken*, pp. 146-8. Henderson's speech at Burnley was subsequently published as A. Henderson, *The New Peace Plan: Labour's Work at the League of Nations Assembly* (1924). See also Winkler's concluding remarks, p. 196.

¹⁸ Marquand, *MacDonald*, p. 356.

¹⁹ J. R. MacDonald, 'Protocol and Pact', *Labour Magazine* 111, 1925, quoted in D. Carlton, *MacDonald Versus Henderson* (1970), p. 27.

²⁰ Carlton, *MacDonald versus Henderson*, pp. 26-8, argues this was one of the fundamental causes of friction between MacDonald and Henderson that came to a head between 1929 and 1931.

²¹ Ceadel, *Pacifism*, pp. 72-3.

²² *Ibid*, p. 77.

disarmament necessarily required the organisation of some form of international force. In 1925, therefore, he launched his Peace Letter – a petition committing its signatories to ‘refuse to support or render war service to any government which resorts to arms’. He believed that he had discovered a new and truly objective form of pacifism, dubbed ‘humanitarian’ and ‘utilitarian’ by Ceadel.²³ This did not fall back on prior religious or political assumptions but instead made the simple calculation that the unhappiness and destruction caused by war would always outweigh its benefits. This must be so, he contended in *Now is the Time*, because the tremendous economic dislocation of the Great War had demonstrated that war always fails ‘to achieve a single desirable objective, whatever its gigantic cost may be’.²⁴ Nevertheless for the time being he clearly did not feel that these views were inconsistent with his faith in the efficacy of Labour’s League policy. As Under Secretary to the Colonial and Dominions Office in 1929 he, too, refused to vote against the Labour government’s arms estimates, defending his decision to the Secretary of the Sheffield ILP:

So long as the Labour government shows a disposition to reduce armaments, to pursue a policy of peace and to avoid all wars, so long in fact as I think they are the best government for advancing towards my ideal I am not...going to vote against the government because they won’t go the whole way and abolish the war services at home.²⁵

Criticism from the left on foreign policy was still more muted, despite the fact that the ILP had become increasingly factional, attracting those who were openly dissatisfied with the policies of the Labour party. Henderson’s reforms in 1918 had created a provision for direct individual membership through affiliated ward and

²³ Ibid, pp. 80-1. See also Winkler, *Paths Not Taken*, p. 147.

²⁴ A. Ponsonby, *Now is the time: An Appeal for Peace* (1925), p. 102.

²⁵ Ponsonby to Rowson, August 1929, quoted in Ceadel, *Pacifism*, pp. 82-3.

constituency parties, which meant that the ILP was no longer the main way into the party for non-trade unionists. From 1925, under the chairmanship of the Clydesider Jimmy Maxton, it sought a new role as a powerhouse of socialist ideas and veered sharply to the left, but in doing so lost much of its moderate support. Yet in an essentially peaceful international environment most of its attention was directed towards social and economic policy – in particular to the development of underconsumptionist theories and ‘Living Wage’ proposals.²⁶ In these years the ILP did not formulate a cogent critique of Labour’s League of Nations foreign policy.

The Labour party’s fragile agreement on foreign policy might have been exposed by the first test of the League’s ability to resolve a serious dispute. The conflict between Japan and China erupted suddenly in Manchuria in September 1931. Both states were members of the League, and China explicitly asked it to intervene. It was, moreover, quite clear that Japan was the aggressor. The ‘Mukden incident’, which involved the alleged sabotage of some 31 inches of Japanese-controlled railway, was a spurious excuse for the seizure of a large and prosperous Chinese province. However, the party was preoccupied with domestic affairs and willing to await quietly the report of the League of Nations Commission of Inquiry headed by Lord Lytton.

The collapse of the Labour government amid the sterling and budget crisis of August 1931 meant that the party was absorbed in a comprehensive consideration of domestic economic policy. The overriding priority here was to develop definite policies for the next Labour government, because the absence of these was thought to have allowed a difference of principle to develop within the Cabinet with catastrophic

²⁶ Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, pp. 42-3.

consequences for the movement. Opinion had been divided as to whether a Labour government should follow financial orthodoxy and agree to a ten percent cut in unemployment benefit in order to reduce the budget deficit at this time of great economic depression. MacDonald felt able to endorse the cut and instead of offering the resignation of the whole Labour government, announced his intention to form a National Government with the Conservatives and some Liberals. Debate within the Labour party, therefore, centred on matters of economic policy.

Divisions emerged, in particular, between the lines taken by the NEC and NJC on the one hand and, after its formation in 1932, by the Socialist League on the other - the groups that would later oppose each other over foreign policy. The events of August 1931 and then the general election in October of that year had created institutional strains in the Labour movement and shifted the centre of power away from the PLP. The parliamentary party, which had effectively controlled the party for the previous decade, was reduced to a meagre 46 MPs after the election. Of those remaining exactly half were representatives of the Miners' Federation. With most of the experienced parliamentary leaders excluded, its composition was not unlike that of the pre-war party, even the LRC. MacDonald, Snowden and Thomas had, of course, defected to the National government. Passfield and Parmoor had decided that this was a suitable juncture at which to go into retirement, while Henderson, Morrison, Greenwood and Dalton had lost their seats in the electoral debacle. The only former cabinet minister to retain his seat had been Lansbury, who was duly elected as PLP leader in November 1931, and on Henderson's retirement in October 1932 as overall party leader. With the relatively junior Attlee as his deputy, and the inexperienced Cripps as the other leading member of the PLP, Lansbury led the small band of

parliamentarians that indulged in leftist rhetoric, but was increasingly overshadowed by the NEC as the voice of the political wing of the movement.²⁷

After losing their seats in October 1931, Dalton and Morrison had begun to use the NEC as their power base, from where they worked to develop a range of clearly defined, though essentially moderate, economic policies that the party could implement once elected. In doing this they found themselves increasingly allied with Bevin and Citrine on the TUC General Council. Before 1926 the Council's concerns had been almost wholly industrial. But in the aftermath of the General Strike, with its involvement in the Mond-Turner talks, the Macmillan committee and the Economic Advisory Council, the General Council, and Bevin in particular, had begun to take a great interest in general economic policies, even monetary policies.²⁸ In August 1931 the General Council had played a pivotal role in convincing a minority of the Cabinet to resist cuts in unemployment benefit. It had, indeed, become seriously disillusioned with the entire parliamentary party, and begun to assert forcefully that the Labour party was just the political wing of the TUC. In late 1931 the TUC leaders seized the opportunity to formalise their position of increased influence within the movement. On the insistence of Citrine, the moribund NJC was reconstituted so that it consisted of seven members from the General Council, but only three each from the NEC and the Parliamentary Executive. It was also given an extended jurisdiction to 'consider all questions affecting the Labour movement as a whole, and make provisions for taking immediate and joint action on all questions of national emergency', and to 'endeavour to secure a common policy and joint action, whether

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 17-8.

²⁸ Bullock, *Bevin*, chs. 13-17.

by legislation or otherwise, on all questions affecting the workers as producers, consumers and citizens'.²⁹

Thereafter the NEC and the NJC worked closely together and, drawing in particular on the work of the NEC Policy Committee, developed economic policies that contrasted with those suggested by the Socialist League, which characteristically demanded more far-reaching changes to the capitalist system. The Socialist League was created in October 1932 by the merger of a minority from the ILP that did not accept its decision to disaffiliate from the Labour party, with the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda (SSIP) – a think tank set up by G.D.H.Cole in June 1931 to supply the party with new ideas.³⁰ In any case, the Labour party's Leicester conference of October 1932 almost totally neglected the Far Eastern Crisis; instead there was a bitter confrontation between the NEC-NJC and the Socialist League about the speed at which a Labour government should nationalise the joint-stock banks.³¹

After the publication of the Lytton Report in October 1932 the party leadership began to take more interest in the Manchurian question, but not to such an extent that it caused a break down in the party's delicate agreement on League affairs achieved in the mid to late 1920s. The leadership's approach now gradually became distinct from that of the National government. They criticised the inaction of the Foreign Secretary, Simon, as the League of Nations struggled in vain to implement the Lytton Report, which, though mildly critical of Japan, had set out a course of conciliation whereby Japanese rights and interests would be recognised in an autonomous Manchuria.³² On 22 February 1933 a joint meeting of the TUC General Council and the National

²⁹ Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, pp. 18-9.

³⁰ Ibid, pp.42-4 details these developments.

³¹ Ibid, p.49.

Executive adopted a resolution asking for the application of an economic boycott against Japan under Article XVI.³³ However, military sanctions were not mentioned either then, or later in March and April as the renewed Japanese offensive gathered momentum. Faith in the efficacy of economic sanctions remained firm. In the summer Henderson wrote retrospectively that Labour had demanded ‘with all the emphasis at its command that the covenant should be upheld against the aggression of Japan’,³⁴ but this was an exaggeration. Labour’s demands for even economic sanctions had been decidedly infrequent as the Chinese had been forced to push for an armistice, which was eventually signed on 3 May 1933. In fact, the parliamentary party’s interest in the Far Eastern crisis lay not so much in events in China itself, as in the effects on the World Disarmament Conference. The National government’s handling of the crisis was said to be undermining the conference’s prospects for success. This was a cry behind which the whole party could easily unite, particularly at a time when Henderson was chairing the Disarmament Conference in Geneva. In the face of unchecked Japanese aggression, they argued, all the powers now felt insufficiently secure to disarm – just as France, with its potentially powerful neighbour, had itself claimed for the previous decade.³⁵ Accordingly, pacifist and leftist dissent did not come to the fore.

Even the rise and consolidation of Hitler’s Nazi regime in Germany during 1933-4 did not provoke explicit divisions over foreign policy to develop within the party. Foreign affairs inevitably did begin to assume a greater prominence in party discussions, but much of the discord remained implicit. Before the 1933 party

³² See Attlee’s comments – *H.C.Debs*, 270, col. 528, 10 November 1932.

³³ NEC minutes, 22 February 1933.

³⁴ A. Henderson, *Labour’s Foreign Policy* (1933), p.4.

conference Henderson produced a pamphlet – *Labour's Foreign Policy* - which reaffirmed and strengthened Labour's commitment to the League of Nations in the deteriorating international situation. For the first time he now presented an international police force as the basis of the pooled security that would, in turn, facilitate disarmament.³⁶ At the conference, however, Henderson's League policy was logically nullified by the passage of a 'war resistance' resolution introduced by Trevelyan on behalf of the Socialist League, which repudiated any loyalty to the League by arguing that:

The League is worked by feeble and sceptical governments like our own, or by governments that openly deride world peace, like Italy and Germany. If our present government would not use the League of Nations to try to check Japan, have we any belief at all that it would itself be checked if it embroiled itself with other nations?

And recommending that the party should therefore:

Pledge itself to take no part in war and to resist it with the whole force of the Labour Movement and to seek consultation forthwith with the trade union and co-operative movement with a view to deciding and announcing what steps, including a general strike, are to be taken to organise the opposition of the organised working-class movement in the event of war or threat of war.³⁷

Nevertheless when Henderson came to speak on disarmament and introduce his policy document he welcomed the war resistance resolution stating that it marked 'the passionate determination of this conference...that...there shall be no more war'. He even attempted to reconcile it with his League of Nations foreign policy by arguing that Trevelyan's resolution pronounced a 'new spirit', but that the League,

³⁵ See Attlee's comments - *H.C.Deb*, 270, cols. 526-7, 10 November 1932.

³⁶ Henderson, *Labour's Foreign Policy*, esp. pp. 19-22.

³⁷ *LPACR*, 1933, p.186.

through its system of 'collective obligations', continued to provide the 'long-term policy of organising the world for peace'.³⁸ Clearly Henderson was keen to avoid a heated wrangle over foreign policy and preferred, for the time being, to continue to gloss over the fundamental differences that had been tentatively exposed. Perhaps he was aware that most Labour politicians had yet to perceive the tremendous implications that the very nature of Hitler's state necessarily brought to foreign policy and would not have appreciated a prolonged conference debate on the matter. While Hitler had moved with great certainty, working quickly after the passage of the Enabling Act in March 1933 to bring all aspects of German life under the control of his party, the first Labour reactions had been confused. It seems likely that much of the party was prevented from producing an unequivocal response by the belief it had clung to since Versailles, that certain of the national grievances against which Hitler campaigned should be redressed.³⁹

During the following year, in a context where Hitler's dramatic withdrawal from both the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations on 14 October 1933 boded ill for the long-term prospects of international peace, Henderson renewed his efforts to commit the party to a strong League of Nations policy. In the first six months of 1934 he shaped a report - *War and Peace* - produced by a joint sub-committee of Labour's three Executives. This stressed that Labour's foreign policy remained firmly grounded upon the collective peace system of the League of Nations, nominally reconciled this with war resistance, but in such a way that this resistance would only operate in certain very limited conditions. Significantly, *War and Peace* also acknowledged that in the interim period before an international League police

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 188-91.

force replaced national armed forces Britain *might* have to use its own military and naval forces in support of the League in restraining an aggressor nation. This was a tentative statement of the case for a sanctionist League which would be made with respect to the Abyssinian Crisis the following year and, as Henderson recognised, it was a new departure. At this stage, however, there was no immediate aggressor who needed to be restrained – the threat that Hitler presented was a potential one for the future. Accordingly, at the party conference in October Henderson felt able to present *War and Peace*, which was incorporated into Labour's new programme *For Socialism and Peace*, in a conciliatory manner in order to temper potential criticism. He argued, disingenuously, that he was 'not putting forward a new policy' but merely 'restating Labour's aims and Labour's policy' and adding 'a little emphasis here and there'. He added, moreover, that 'we have not abandoned the idea of the general strike, nor have we in any way repudiated the Hastings resolution'.⁴⁰ His tack was successful; for the time being the party's delicate consensus on foreign affairs remained in place. William Mellor's short speech attacking reliance on the League of Nations was the Socialist League's only counter attack.⁴¹ In response to the introduction of *For Socialism and Peace*, Cripps criticised the limited nature of its proposals to reorganise the domestic economy, but made no mention of its stance towards the League of Nations.⁴²

After this point the influence of Henderson began to decline. He was now in his seventies and suffering from almost constant ill health. Indeed, he died just over a year later, in October 1935. The key figures on the National Executive and the

³⁹ Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, pp.25-6; Naylor, *Labour's International Policy* pp. 48-9.

⁴⁰ *LPACR*, 1934, pp. 152-8. In particular see pp. 152-3 for Henderson's conciliatory remarks.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 173-4.

National Council of Labour (as the NJC was known after July 1934) – Dalton, Attlee, Bevin and Citrine – now became the party's leading proponents of a sanctionist League. During late summer 1935 they found themselves, in the face of determined pacifist and leftist opposition, pushing for the implementation of the sanctions – including military ones – that *War and Peace* had tentatively endorsed in order to check the impending Italian aggression.

The deep-seated foreign policy divisions within the movement had only come to the fore with the general realisation that Mussolini was intent on attacking Abyssinia – a fellow member of the League. Mussolini had, in fact, been building up his forces in North Africa since the clash at Wal-Wal in December 1934. He was determined to inflict a crushing victory on Abyssinia in order, he claimed, to secure access to its raw materials, but in reality to bolster the domestic prestige of his fascist regime. Haile Selassie, the Abyssinian Emperor, had first referred the dispute to the League as early as January 1935. Until June, however, the Labour party remained preoccupied with the threat from Germany that had been growing steadily more ominous throughout the year. In March, for instance, Hitler had announced that, in contravention of the Versailles Treaty, a German Air Force now existed and that military conscription was being introduced. Now as the League Council made moves to take up the Italian-Abyssinian dispute, the Labour party also began to turn its attention to this more immediately pressing matter.

However, by this stage the National government – in response to the announcement of the results of the Peace Ballot in late June – was beginning to take a pro-League stance and this greatly shaped the subsequent debate within the Labour

⁴² Ibid, pp. 158-60.

party. The Ballot demonstrated, as its leading organisers Gilbert Murray and Lord Cecil of the League of Nations Union (LNU) had hoped, massive support for the policy of collective security. Of the 11.6 million people who had voted, over 11.1 million were in favour of Britain remaining a member of the League and 10 million were ready to support economic and other non-military sanctions against an aggressor. Even on the controversial question of military sanctions, nearly seven million were ready to enforce them as against 2.3 million who voted 'no' and 2.4 million who were doubtful.⁴³ The results undoubtedly provided a context in which Labour's advocates of a sanctionist League felt able to demand a firm commitment to the League sanctions that their party had only tentatively endorsed in the previous year. The Labour movement had, in any case, associated itself with the Ballot when polling began in November 1934, in sharp contrast to the National government which had taken a decidedly ambivalent attitude.⁴⁴ Now, however, the results influenced the thinking of Baldwin, who had replaced MacDonald as prime minister in June. He abandoned the government's earlier reticence and actively endorsed the notion of collective security in an attempt to win over this 'League of Nations' vote ahead of the general election that was due before November 1936 but expected at any time.⁴⁵ On 23 July he asserted that 'the foreign policy of this government is founded upon the League of Nations'.⁴⁶ This meant that when Labour's three Executives met on 3-4 September and, influenced by Dalton, Attlee, Bevin and Citrine, drafted a resolution

⁴³ M.Ceadel, 'The first British referendum: the Peace Ballot, 1934-5', *English Historical Review*, 1980 (95), pp. 810-39 and D.S.Birn, *The League of Nations Union* (New York, 1981), ch. 8 give thorough accounts of the Peace Ballot.

⁴⁴ J.A.Thompson, 'The "Peace Ballot" and the "Rainbow" Controversy', *Journal of British Studies*, 1981 (20), pp. 167-8. See also NCL Declaration, 12 November 1934 for the Labour movement's endorsement of the Ballot.

⁴⁵ This was an assertion first made in Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*, p. 542.

demanding the use of the full range of League sanctions against Mussolini they were asking the party to support a line that they struggled to distinguish from that of the National government.

This was the context in which pacifist and Socialist League criticism of the NEC-NCL line intensified. The TUC meeting on 5 September endorsed the resolution by 2,962,000 votes to 102,000 - just six days before Hoare, the foreign secretary, announced at the League Council meeting on 11 September the government's 'unwavering fidelity to the League' and its subsequent commitment to 'collective resistance to all acts of unprovoked aggression'.⁴⁷ In the years since 1932 the twists and turns of international events and domestic politics had driven both the pacifists, Ponsonby and Lansbury, and the Socialist League under the leadership of Cripps gradually to develop views on foreign policy that opposed the official party line. Now, with the party conference due to meet at Brighton on 30 September, these hitherto understated divisions looked set to come to a head.

⁴⁶ Quoted in R.A.C.Parker, 'Great Britain, France and the Ethiopian Crisis 1935-6', *English Historical Review*, 1974 (89), p.298.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, p. 89.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PACIFIST CRITIQUE

After 1931 the Labour party's most prominent pacifists, Lansbury and Ponsonby, led the party in the two Houses of Parliament. From as early as 1932 Ponsonby, inspired by his 'humanitarian' pacifism, used his position to criticise the party's support for multilateral disarmament and to call for unilateral moves. After the acceptance of *War and Peace* in October 1934 he coupled these demands with an attack on the impracticality of League sanctions, arguing that the diverse national interests of the powers would always prevent them from working together. He repeated these charges with increasing vehemence as Dalton and his allies moved towards a policy of military and economic sanctions against Italy in summer 1935. In contrast to Ponsonby, Lansbury did not find his Christian pacifism incompatible with party policy until the party theoretically committed itself to the use of sanctions at the 1934 party conference. Thereafter he tried to distance himself from the party line, often by endorsing party policy, but then inserting a personal reservation. It was only in August and September 1935 that his complete inability to endorse the party's sanctionist League policy became apparent.

In 1932 Ponsonby was prompted to call for unilateral disarmament by the deterioration of the international environment caused by the Manchurian crisis and by the cumbersome progress of the Disarmament Conference. Since Henderson's monumental efforts were tied up with the search for disarmament of the multilateral variety in Geneva, Ponsonby now found himself, in contrast to the 1920s, seriously at odds with party policy. While he was, at this stage, the only prominent member of the

Labour party to make such objections, within the wider pacifist movement he was one of many to assert their beliefs more passionately under the pressure of international events. Perhaps most sensationally in February 1932 Herbert Gray, Maude Royden and the Rev. R.H.L 'Dick' Sheppard, influenced partly by Gandhi's exploits in India, made ill-fated plans to form a 'Peace Army' of unarmed passive resisters to intercede between Japanese and Chinese armed forces.¹

In 1925 Ponsonby had not supported unilateral disarmament, writing that he 'would neither vote for, nor advocate, the abolition of the standing army and the scrapping of the navy', because 'public opinion is not ready for such a step'.² Now, however, he was emphatic that a 'more senseless and dangerous policy than reduction of armaments by international agreements cannot be imagined' because 'in this matter of disarmament there is no half-way house'.³ He contended that since democratic opinion was naturally peaceful unless inflamed by governmental propaganda – a view he had expressed in his 1928 book *Falsehood in Wartime* – unilateral disarmament could lead to the elimination of international aggression. So far as Manchuria was concerned, therefore, it was clear to Ponsonby that:

Had China been unarmed, had no Chinese been able to fire a single shot, Japan had she attacked China would have been a self-confessed aggressor before all the world, including her own people. Knowing therefore that she could not bamboozle her own people by any possible pretence that an armed attack in a completely unarmed people was not aggression, she would never have attempted to take such action.⁴

¹ Ceadel, *Pacifism*, pp. 87-8, 93-5.

² Ponsonby, *Now is the Time*, p.173.

³ A.Ponsonby, *Disarmament: A Discussion* (1928), pp.26-7.

⁴ A.Ponsonby in *New World*, March 1932, quoted in Ceadel, *Pacifism*, p.90.

On 10 May 1932 he criticised the British government in the House of Lords for taking a qualitative approach to disarmament – that is to say, suggesting only the prohibition of certain kinds of weapon and methods of warfare - and went on to call for unilateral disarmament. Since his ‘humanitarian’ pacifism showed him that ‘war settles nothing...victors and vanquished alike suffer and nobody really wins’, and since he held that public opinion was fundamentally peaceful, he thought that ‘a nation – preferably...my own – should act on its own responsibility and renounce the war weapon now’.⁵ Ponsonby was well aware that he strongly diverged from the official party line of support for the Disarmament Conference. Henderson ‘expressed disapproval’ of the line he had taken in his speech and reproached him, as leader in the Lords, for speaking on his own, rather than the party’s, behalf. Ponsonby felt so strongly about his anomalous position that he offered his resignation as leader in the Lords to Lansbury in June 1932, although the National Executive promptly refused to accept it.⁶

Even with the rise of Hitler’s regime Ponsonby continued to present unilateral disarmament as the ultimate panacea to the potential problems of world aggression. Speaking in the House of Lords on 27 July 1933 he stressed his unceasing faith in the inherently peaceful nature of public opinion. He remarked that although ‘the existing situation in Germany [was] deplorable in many ways’, he was ‘not apprehensive because of what is going on in Germany’ because he did ‘not believe for one moment that that nation or any other nation has got aggressive designs’. When he then urged

⁵ *HL Deb*, 84, cols. 355-65, 10 May 1932.

⁶ Ponsonby papers, Ms Eng. Hist.c.673/109-112 contain a correspondence between Ponsonby and Henderson discussing their confrontation over Ponsonby’s speech. R.A. Jones, *Arthur Ponsonby: The Politics of Life* (1989), p.192-3 also details Henderson’s criticism of Ponsonby and the latter’s attempted resignation.

the government to 'take a bold initiative...to prevent the breakdown of the Disarmament Conference' in order to 'bring the world to peace', it was clear he was thinking in terms of unilateral disarmament.⁷ By the time of the debate on *War and Peace* at the 1934 Labour party conference he had had longer to contemplate the rise of Nazism, yet still moved a resolution in favour of 'disarmament by example'.⁸

After the acceptance of *War and Peace* by the party conference in October 1934 Ponsonby's divergence from official party policy increased. Now that the party was theoretically committed to the use of economic, financial and, tentatively, military sanctions under the auspices of the League to check aggression, Ponsonby made clear his belief that such a course was impracticable. In the House of Lords on 5 December 1934 he explained that he was in favour of a 'common condemnation' by the League 'of any action on the part of a so-called aggressor' because this was like 'a vote of censure on the part of the world against that nation, and that vote of censure, even if it is not supported by any action at all, has a considerable effect on the prestige and *amour propre* of the nation in question'. However, so far as sanctions were concerned he foresaw 'considerable difficulty'. He did not make 'any very clear distinction between economic and military sanctions, because any drastic economic sanction would in the long run always lead to military sanction'. The debacle over the Far East had confirmed Ponsonby in his long-held conviction that it would be very difficult to 'get a corporate agreement on the part of all powers which are members of the League of Nations to take military action or economic action against a recalcitrant power which may be openly condemned as breaker of the peace'. Their 'particular economic

⁷ *HL Deb*, 88, cols. 1188-9, 1191-2, 27 July 1933.

⁸ *LPACR*, 1934, p.168.

interests in connection with that power will not allow them freely to join in military or economic action against that power'.⁹

As the prospect of Italian aggression in Abyssinia began to loom large, Ponsonby's views came under serious attack. His assertion of the impracticality of collective security and his positive belief in disarmament by example was privately criticised by Dalton and Citrine at a social meeting at the end of July 1935 in of all places the Russian Embassy.¹⁰ By the time the three Executives met on 3-4 September to determine their policy towards Italy, Ponsonby had already made explicit his objection to the use of the range of League sanctions in this case. In a letter in *The Times* on 28 August 1935 he stressed that such an approach was seriously flawed. He held that 'unanimity...for collective action cannot be reached'. The past 15 years had shown him that there 'will always be some nations guided very naturally by self-interest who for economic or political reasons will be reluctant to quarrel with a neighbour or friend, even should that neighbour be condemned as an aggressor'. This meant that so far as the Italian-Abyssinian dispute was concerned 'nothing would be more clumsy and ill-advised than for Great Britain precipitately...to take the lead in proposing eventual sanctions' - it would only foster tension with those nations that were not inclined to follow. Since a British lead was far from certain to be followed it was likely to be regarded as provocative, and yet empty, 'bravado'. The answer, claimed Ponsonby, was to work through the ordinary channels of diplomacy to find a solution. Pessimistically he believed that 'if we fail and Mussolini is determined on ruining his country for the sake of a cheap triumph over ill-armed African tribes,

⁹ HL Deb, 95, col. 154, 5 December 1934. Here Ponsonby was developing a line of thought that he had adumbrated earlier in the year - see *HL Deb*, 91, cols. 367-8, 15 March 1934.

¹⁰ Jones, *Ponsonby* p. 204.

neither the League nor any combination of nations can stop him without a disastrous extension of the area of war'. He thought that dictatorships necessarily had a short lifespan and so the best policy was to 'keep our heads, avoid hysteria, look far enough ahead and prevent at all costs the creation of far more serious international dissension which may lead to a European conflagration'.¹¹

After the three Executives agreed on a sanctionist League policy on 3-4 September Ponsonby decided that it was best for him to resign his leadership in the Lords – a decision he made public on 17 September. He claimed that 'serious differences with the party on all the more important points of foreign policy and on the decision they have made in the present grave international crisis' made it impossible for him to continue.¹² A private memorandum, which Ponsonby wrote on 4 November, entitled 'Why I Resigned' provides one side of the explanation for his action. In this he emphasised that his belief in the sheer impracticability of economic and military sanctions was his primary objection to the party's policy. He reiterated his assertion that sanctionist League action was bound to be 'ineffective and merely aggravate the situation', and 'extend instead of restrict the area of warfare'. With greater clarity than was discernible in his earlier public pronouncements, Ponsonby recorded that he was unable to place any faith in the League because it was 'not all-inclusive' with 'three great nations being outside', and because there was no way in which sanctions, in any case, 'could not be undertaken immediately'.¹³

¹¹ *The Times*, 28 August 1935. Ponsonby had used the same arguments in a draft letter to an unnamed acquaintance dated 6 August 1935 – see Ponsonby papers Ms Eng. Hist. c. 676/91-3.

¹² *The Times*, 19 September 1935. See also Ponsonby to Lansbury, 17 September 1935, Lansbury papers 28a.

¹³ 'Why I Resigned', 4 November 1935, Ponsonby papers Ms Eng. Hist. c. 676/193-4.

In his diary, however, Ponsonby recorded another underlying reason for his resignation. It would enable him to devote his energies to pacifist activities and free himself from the responsibilities of what he considered his 'very inferior position of leader in the Lords'. He had been tempted to take such a course in 1932 and so in a sense clearly felt it was 'easier for me now'.¹⁴ The Labour party in the Lords, consisting of only 12 members, was numerically tiny, not least because the party was out of office and had in opposition renewed its attack on the House of Lords as an institution, so that it could not recommend appointment of new peers. Perhaps as the only active Labour peer with any substantial ministerial and parliamentary experience, Ponsonby had felt a certain duty to continue as leader, from which he now felt absolved by his deep objection to a sanctionist League policy.

Ponsonby was in an undoubtedly strong position to become a spokesman for the wider pacifist movement, being widely admired by a younger generation of recruits to pacifism – among them the writers and publicists Beverley Nichols, Storm Jameson and A.A. Milne.¹⁵ The organisation of the Peace Ballot had, by now, also forced many strands within the pacifist movement to define, and then push, their views more forcefully. The Manchurian crisis had discredited the NMWM's belief in the power of moral sanctions to prevent war, and it had since then maintained a somewhat hazy faith in the efficacy of economic sanctions. Once polling for the Ballot was underway in November 1934, however, doubts arose about whether there were any economic sanctions that were mild enough to be acceptable to pacifists and yet strong enough to be effective. It was, for example, only in March 1935 that Dr Alfred

¹⁴ Ponsonby diary, 4 September 1935, quoted in Jones, *Ponsonby*, p. 204.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 200. Indeed in October 1933 Nichols had written to Ponsonby and told him how he often gained hope and inspiration from his example - Nichols to Ponsonby, 2 October 1933, *ibid*.

Salter, a Labour MP and prominent member of the NMWM, announced his change of mind and began to press for a 'no' vote to the question asking about economic sanctions.¹⁶ Similarly, this period also saw the emergence of Dick Sheppard's 'New Pacifism', when he responded to the organisation of the Peace Ballot and called, on 16 October 1934, for postcards to reassure him that: 'We renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will we support or sanction another'. The response was impressive and in July 1935 he held a rally for the 50,000 signatories in the Albert Hall and formed the Sheppard Peace Movement.¹⁷ This was the wider movement within which Ponsonby presumably hoped to increase his standing after speaking at the party conference.

In contrast to Ponsonby's persistent, if undramatic, disagreement with Labour's foreign policy in the years after 1931, Lansbury's initial reaction to the Manchurian crisis, the rise of Hitler, and the subsequent collapse of the Disarmament Conference, did not alienate him from the rest of the Labour party. Lansbury did not try to hide his pacifism. It was just that in the years 1931-3 the party's foreign policy included a broad range of opinion – Ponsonby had only stepped outside it by pushing his views so forcefully.

There was, very briefly, a possibility that the Labour party's demand for the imposition of economic sanctions against Japan in February 1933 would separate Lansbury from the mainstream of the party. His first biographer and son-in-law,

¹⁶ Ceadel, *Pacifism*, pp.87, 155-6.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 177-180. See also M.Pugh, 'Pacifism and Politics 1931-5', *Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), p. 654.

Postgate, speculated that Lansbury had serious doubts about whether he could agree to these since they seemed likely to lead to military sanctions.¹⁸ Certainly when he duly demanded an embargo on arms and ammunition against Japan in the House of Commons he felt the need to stress that 'as a pacifist, I should not send them to either side'.¹⁹ This was an early example of Lansbury's tendency to voice the party's view and then add a personal reservation. At this stage, however, foreign policy was not the Labour party's priority – its subsequent demands for action against Japan were almost as half-hearted as the National government's course was ineffectual - and this prevented these divisions from rising to the fore.

Otherwise Lansbury remained comfortably within the Labour consensus. His insistent and passionate advocacy of disarmament was acceptable to the body of the party, even if he sometimes went beyond its endorsement of multilateral disarmament and tentatively proposed unilateral renunciation of arms. In a letter to *The Times* in March 1933, for example, he emphasised that as a pacifist accepting the words of Christ, 'those who take the sword perish by the sword', he hoped that 'we British Christians will give up all reliance on force, cease to manufacture poison gas, give up building ships and other instruments of war'.²⁰ He was quick to criticise Hitler's regime. During the party's May Day Demonstration in 1933 he expressed the view that 'fascism with all its nonsensical talk about nationalism is the gospel of decadence

¹⁸ R. Postgate, *A Life of George Lansbury* (1951), pp. 286-7.

¹⁹ *HC Deb*, 275, col. 46, 27 February 1933.

²⁰ *The Times*, 16 March 1933. J. Schneer, *George Lansbury* (Manchester, 1990), ch. 3, accepts the view also advanced in this thesis that Lansbury desired unilateral disarmament. In contrast, Postgate, *Lansbury*, p. 287, holds that Lansbury 'was not...in favour of unilateral disarmament; he wished British armament lowered to the very Plimsoll line of safety (which he probably would have drawn low) but he was not (despite occasional rash rhetoric) in favour of Britain going naked in an armed world'.

and despair'.²¹ Later he stated categorically that 'we hate fascism and all the brutal tyranny of dictatorship wherever practised'.²² Yet since he qualified his criticism by attributing the rise of fascism and the 'war spirit' in Europe to the 'economic nationalism fostered and developed by the brutal, cynical peace treaties which smashed up the old European boundaries and sowed the seeds of the difficulties confronting us today',²³ this hardly changed his approach to foreign affairs. After Hitler walked out of the Disarmament Conference in October 1933, he commented that the 'best way of strengthening fascism is to treat Germany stupidly by giving Germany the impression that she is not regarded as on an equality with other nations'. He had lost none of his passion for unilateral disarmament. Even now he demanded that 'the British government shall take the lead and call upon all its associates themselves to disarm, and thus carry out the pledges given to Germany in 1919',²⁴ and that Britain should make unilateral plans to abolish all aerial warfare.²⁵ When he spoke on the issue in the House of Commons he was rather more reticent but nevertheless called for:

A large and important reduction in the expenditure of all nations on armed forces, for the general abolition of all weapons forbidden to Germany...for the abolition of military aircraft...and the suppression of all private manufacture of and trade in arms, and for strict international inspection and control of the execution of the Disarmament Treaty.²⁶

At a time when the Labour party conference in October 1933 had simultaneously endorsed Henderson's document on *Labour's Foreign Policy* and

²¹ *Daily Herald*, 8 May 1933.

²² *Daily Herald*, 20 October 1933.

²³ *Daily Herald*, 9 September 1933. For similar comments see *Manchester Guardian*, 31 July 1933.

²⁴ *Daily Herald*, 20 October 1933.

²⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 2 November 1933.

²⁶ *HC Deb*, 281, col. 79, 7 November 1933.

Trevelyan's war resistance resolution, Lansbury's tentative demands for unilateral disarmament inspired by Christian pacifism merely constituted an alternative gloss on the party's somewhat confused foreign policy. Lansbury was himself particularly in tune with the war resistance resolution on both pacifist *and* socialist grounds. Just three weeks before the conference Lansbury argued that the 'workers must in no circumstances take part in a capitalist war' because a war of this kind 'must always mean ruin for the toiling masses'.²⁷

Lansbury's position became considerably more precarious once the party, as a whole, began to move towards support for the kind of strong League detailed in the *War and Peace* document. He was ill and in hospital from December 1933 until July 1934 and so played no part in its drafting, but now began to have serious doubts about his position, which he expressed in a personal letter to the party secretary, Jim Middleton:

I feel strongly that those who have drafted the chapters [of *For Socialism and Peace*] should be in charge and will be quite satisfied if the whole thing is taken up without me...I think we have been all wrong for centuries. The only path to peace is not to fight...our people must give up all right to hold any other country, renounce all imperialism and stand unarmed before the world. She will then become the strongest nation in the world, fully armed by justice and love.²⁸

He was, however, at this stage reluctant to voice his pacifist dissent from the party's policy. He spoke at the TUC meeting in September 1934 as the fraternal delegate but did not mention foreign affairs. Similarly at the party's 1934 Southport

²⁷ *Birmingham Post*, 9 September 1933. Schneer, *Lansbury*, ch. 3, explains the connection between Lansbury's socialism and his pacifism.

²⁸ Lansbury to Middleton, 9 August 1934, Middleton papers, quoted in Shepherd, 'Labour and the Trade Unions', p.217.

conference 'he was asked to speak on peace, but backed out'.²⁹ At other times his divergence on foreign policy was apparent. His claim that there was 'no escape from the horrors of the war except by a refusal to take part in or sanction war'³⁰ was hardly compatible with the scenario of a League war that *War and Peace* tentatively broached. His personal belief in unilateral disarmament was sometimes barely qualified. He admitted that if he 'would stand before the world unarmed', but was told by his colleagues that such a view was 'impracticable'.³¹ For the most part, however, Lansbury did not stray from the mainstream of Labour views on foreign policy. He continued to call for multilateral disarmament, with the proviso that Britain should offer a lead by making plans to abolish aerial warfare,³² and coupled these demands with calls for a world economic conference to discuss the control of raw materials and the sharing of markets.³³ Since it was clear to Lansbury that the 'main causes of war are economic' this led him to criticise the imperialism that underpinned it. In the quest for raw materials and markets 'Japan, Germany, Italy all clamour for a place in the sun'. Lansbury's socialist belief was that 'there is room for everybody' and that Britain, with its world-wide Empire had a duty to lead the way in sidelining private enterprise and indicate its willingness 'to share the territories under our flag and the markets we control with the rest of the world'. The connection between the two sides of Lansbury's thought was obvious. What would be essentially an 'economic League

²⁹ Dalton diary, 'Note on Year 1934'; Dalton, *Fateful Years* p.55.

³⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 November 1934.

³¹ *Daily Herald*, 6 April 1935.

³² *HC Deb*, 299, col. 1395, 21 March 1935; *Daily Herald*, 11 February 1935, 6 May 1935, 18 May 1935.

³³ *Manchester Guardian*, 1 April 1935; *The Scotsman*, 17 April 1935; *Daily Herald*, 5 July 1935.

of Nations' would be able 'to control the distribution of raw materials needed for the production of armaments, and so prevent their manufacture'.³⁴

It seems likely that Lansbury was reticent in asserting his pacifist credentials because, so long as the question of applying the sanctions specified in *War and Peace* could be evaded, he was determined to remain loyal to a party that he felt badly needed his leadership. It was only when the very real possibility of a League war against Italy arose that Lansbury felt he could no longer gloss over his differences with the party's policy. Perhaps it was an appreciation of the potential difficulty that prompted Lansbury at a meeting of the party's International Sub-committee on 13 February 1935 to advise against Philip Noel Baker's suggestion that the party might usefully make a declaration on the Italian-Abyssinian crisis.³⁵ In any case the first indication of Lansbury's inability to endorse Labour policy publicly came when he spoke in the House on 1 August 1935. He asked 'the government that they should, without reservation, stand loyally by the League Covenant and all that that implied', but found it necessary to qualify this by saying that he was 'not anxious to send the fleet or increase the fleet anywhere'.³⁶

With the three Executives thought likely to draw up a resolution demanding the full range of League sanctions against Italy when they met before the Margate TUC, Lansbury asserted his pacifist convictions passionately in a letter to the editor of *The Times* on 19 August. Now that war between Italy and Abyssinia was generally thought to be 'unavoidable', Lansbury explicitly linked his Christian pacifism with the demand for economic justice. He appealed, once again, for a world economic

³⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 15 July 1935 and *The Times*, 15 July 1935.

³⁵ NEC minutes, 26 February 1935.

³⁶ *HC Deb*, 304, col. 2894, 1 August 1935.

conference to be convened under the auspices of the League. He also suggested that the Archbishops should 'appeal to his Holiness the Pope to join in and call a solemn convocation or congress representative of every phase of Christian and other religious thought, call the gathering to meet in the Holy Land at Jerusalem, and from Mount Calvary "call a truce of God" and bid the war spirit rest'. He then connected the two lines of thought by contending that economic appeasement was 'the Christian way out'. The demand for a fairer distribution of the world's resources was an expression of the Christian ideals of love, reconciliation and atonement. Certainly this was how Lansbury was thinking when he suggested that mankind should 'hear the word of God calling all nations to turn away from strife and pursue the path of co-operation'. There were 'enough raw materials, enough markets for us all' and so 'with the true Christian spirit applied the white and coloured races can cooperate to create a better civilisation than has yet been dreamed of'.³⁷

For the time being Lansbury sometimes still expressed the party's view rather than his own. When, for example, on 21 August, he met Hoare to discuss the Italian-Abyssinian dispute he asked whether Britain was 'going to make quite clear our position, that is to say, were we going to state publicly our adherence to our League obligations'?³⁸ After the meeting of the three Executives, Ponsonby found Lansbury very despondent, feeling trapped by his leadership.³⁹ He was the fraternal delegate at the TUC, but was warned in advance by Citrine not to state his own views.⁴⁰ After Citrine then subsequently contended in his speech to the Congress that to reject the

³⁷ *The Times*, 19 August 1935. Ceadel, *Pacifism*, pp. 188-90, details these developments and describes Lansbury as the 'pioneer and leader' of economic and Christian appeasement, which quickly 'became the panacea with the broadest range of support in the peace movement'.

³⁸ Hoare memorandum, 21 August 1935, PRO, FO 800/295/114-5, copy supplied by Dr P.A. Williamson.

³⁹ A. Ponsonby diary, 4 September 1935, quoted in Jones, *Ponsonby*, p. 204.

policy would be 'turning down our leader, George Lansbury'⁴¹, Lansbury's compromised position was clear. In his own speech to the Congress he could only explain that in spite of the 'views any of us hold in the long run, when we speak on behalf of the movement we can only state what the opinion and decision of the movement is'. He then stressed the aspects of the policy that he endorsed, particularly the call for an economic conference.⁴²

Following the TUC meeting Lansbury seriously contemplated resigning the party leadership.⁴³ Thereafter he expounded his pacifist viewpoint more forcefully. He gave a press interview on 8 September, without consulting his colleagues or the party executive, in which he made it abundantly clear that under no circumstances could he 'support the use of armed force, either by the League of Nations or by individual nations'. He explained his failure to state his views explicitly earlier by claiming that he had faced a dilemma. When speaking on behalf of the party he had always felt bound by loyalty to voice its policy, but on other occasions to try to make it clear that 'on this most important issue I did not agree with the use of force in international affairs'. After the debate on the Italian-Abyssinian question at the TUC, however, he found his position 'very difficult indeed'. The difference of opinion was so great that his colleagues 'may feel that it is imperative that they should have someone as leader who will speak for them with conviction on the subject'.⁴⁴ Rumours now abounded that Lansbury would resign before the party conference.⁴⁵ He did not, however, offer his resignation now for the same reason that he had held back from explicitly

⁴⁰ W.Citrine, *Men and Work* (1964), p.351; Postgate, *Lansbury*, pp. 299-300.

⁴¹ *TUCAR*, 1935, p.371.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 407.

⁴³ Postgate, *Lansbury*, p. 300, claims that Lansbury 'spent 48 hours in self examination'.

⁴⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, and *The Times*, both 9 September 1935.

⁴⁵ See, for example, *News Chronicle*, 12 September 1935.

expressing his pacifist dissent from *War and Peace*. He was 'torn between loyalty to a great life-long conviction and loyalty to a movement'⁴⁶ at a time when he thought he fulfilled an indispensable role in the party. He realised the difficulty in which his departure from office would place the party. There was nothing even approaching agreement on who, amongst the Labour MPs, should succeed Lansbury and there was, in any case, a general election expected at any time that was likely to alter the composition of the parliamentary party.

In the meantime Lansbury asserted publicly his long-held belief that unilateral disarmament offered the best chance for peace. He now recanted his earlier tacit consent to Labour policy. He openly revealed that the 'only months I have to regret in my life were the few short months I was in the government when I had to vote for armaments'. He had had to salve his conscience.⁴⁷ Moreover, at a demonstration organised by the FOR and the Council of Christian Pacifist Groups on 13 September he boldly stated that:

If I were prime minister, backed by the majority of the House of Commons, I would go myself to the Assembly of the League of Nations and say: 'Our nation once and for all renounces armaments and war, and is prepared at once to disarm and invites all other nations to follow our lead'.⁴⁸

Lansbury was acutely aware of the difficult position he now occupied. His unease could only have been exacerbated by the resignations of his fellow pacifist dissenter, Ponsonby, from the leadership in the Lords. Lansbury raised the question of his continued leadership at a meeting of the NEC, but was offered no easy way out of his predicament. He was told that it was a matter for the PLP, but that 'in the opinion

⁴⁶ *News Chronicle*, 9 September 1935.

⁴⁷ *Western Mail*, 23 September 1935.

of the NEC, there is no reason why he should tender his resignation'.⁴⁹ They evidently did not, as Dalton put it, want 'the onus of pushing him out'.⁵⁰ In a letter to Middleton in September Lansbury wrote of the 'quite impossible' situation in which 'we are forced to contradict each other in friendly though peaceful way'. He claimed that his 'own mind never wavers that I should resign', but that everyone 'publicly and...privately urge me to continue'. He even asked Middleton if there was any possibility that the NCL could pass 'a friendly resolution saying the situation is one which must be resolved the party cannot go into a general election with a leader who disagrees with them on so fundamental a question of policy'.⁵¹ His dilemma, however, was left unresolved as the party conference approached.

⁴⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 14 September 1935.

⁴⁹ NEC minutes, 19 September 1935.

⁵⁰ Dalton diary, 19 September 1935.

⁵¹ Lansbury to Middleton, n.d. September 1935, Middleton papers, quoted in Shepherd, 'Labour and the Trade Unions', pp. 219-20. Postgate, *Lansbury*, pp. 300-1, and Schneer, *Lansbury*, pp. 167-8, offer an explanation of Lansbury's behaviour that I do not find convincing. They suggest his reluctance to resign may, in part, have been due to his experiences in 1912, which had taught him to 'Never resign'. After resigning his seat, in order to contest it as a Suffragette, because he had felt that Labour did not support the cause of female suffrage with sufficient vigour, he had quickly found himself in the political wilderness. In 1935, however, it is clear that he privately thought that he should resign, but was persuaded by others not to do so.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SOCIALIST LEAGUE CRITIQUE

In 1933 Cripps became chairman of the Socialist League and chief spokesman for the Labour Left. He now passionately voiced their demands that the party should adopt domestic and foreign policies involving more sweeping changes to the status quo than those which the majority of the party, following the moderate NEC-NJC/NCL line, was currently endorsing. From 1934 he even began to justify the demands for more radical policies by making apocalyptic claims that the National government was not only capitalist and imperialist, but also leaning towards fascism. Thereafter the gulf between the Socialist League and the NEC and NCL majorities widened. However, the dispute only came to a head in September 1935 as Cripps, in a blaze of publicity, made clear his inability to follow the party line and support a policy of League of Nations sanctions against Italy so long as the National government remained in power.

When Cripps had entered politics in 1930 there was no indication that he would soon be advocating extreme socialist views. The successful KC whom MacDonald made Solicitor-General in October 1930, giving him the customary knighthood and arranging for him to become an MP in January 1931, professed only to bring a mild Christian and socialist ethic into political life. He had supported the League of Nations, perhaps following the lead of his father, Lord Parmoor.¹ During the Great War Parmoor had been deeply interested in moves to reform international

relations, and helped to found the League of Nations Society in 1915. As a result, he had also transferred his allegiance from the Conservative to the Labour party, eventually becoming Lord President of the Council in the 1924 Labour government, with special responsibility for the League of Nations.

Following the events of 1931, however, Cripps began to move sharply to the Left. He decided that the sooner a full socialist programme was announced to the electorate the better for the future of the Labour party. At the party conference in October 1931 he exclaimed that 'we can no longer try with one hand to patch up the old building of capitalism and with the other to build the new building of socialism'.² In the years immediately following the formation of the National government, however, such views were common currency in the party which was concerned with preserving its doctrinal integrity, the 'pure milk of the word', as Attlee described it.³ In this context Cripps's talk of gradualism being 'gone from the programme forever'⁴ was hardly unusual. He was simply seen as being more radical in his reaction to the perceived capitalist coup of 1931 than many in the party. It was only when Dalton and Morrison on the NEC and Bevin and Citrine on the NJC/NCL began to make the party more moderate in the course of 1933-4 that the position of Cripps and the Socialist League became anomalous.⁵

After Cripps succeeded Frank Wise as chairman of the Socialist League in 1933 it became more clearly his organisation, not least because he funded a large

¹ For Cripps's earlier advocacy of the League see E.Estorick, *Stafford Cripps: A Biography* (1949), pp. 66-7, 115; Bryant, *Cripps*, pp. 73-5.

² *LPACR*, 1931, p.205.

³ Attlee to Tom Attlee, 7 February 1933, quoted in Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler*, p.27.

⁴ *Daily Herald*, 8 February 1932.

⁵ Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, p.28.

proportion of its activities out of his own money.⁶ From its emergence in October 1932 the League had taken a more radical approach than the moderate SSIP, from which, together with the minority from the ILP that voted against disaffiliation from the Labour party, it had been formed. For instance, Wise, the leader of the ILP minority group was chosen in preference to Bevin, the chairman of SSIP, to head the new body.⁷ Now under Cripps's leadership the Socialist League evolved from a think tank and propaganda body for the Labour party, seeking to improve the party's policies, into what was effectively an organisation within the Labour movement with its own policies and agenda.⁸ It became, much like the ILP in the 1920s, more determinedly the natural home for those who were unhappy with the essentially moderate range of policies the party was adopting. Cripps was, however, only moving the League in the direction that many of its prominent members – William Mellor, Trevelyan, Frank Horrabin, J.T.Murphy, Brailsford, D.N.Pritt, Harold Laski, G.R.Mitchison, Ellen Wilkinson and G.R.Strauss – wanted it to go.⁹

The Socialist League's approach now became less compromising. At its Whitsun conference in 1933 it dramatically argued that the events of 1931 had shown how capitalists would employ almost any means to sabotage Labour government and socialist legislation. The Socialist League, therefore, advised the Labour party that to protect itself against such attacks it should declare in advance an unequivocally socialist policy to the electorate. It emphasised that upon winning a general election, the party should ensure that the King consent to the abolition of the House of Lords before it agreed to take office. The new government should then pass an Emergency

⁶ Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, p.33.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 44-6.

⁸ Ibid, p.51.

Powers Act giving itself semi-dictatorial powers and proceed to nationalise the Bank of England and the joint stock banks.¹⁰ Its rhetoric was now similar to that of the CPGB which, acting upon a manifesto from the Communist International, advocated support for a United Front against fascism and Nazism and spoke of 'the establishment of the working-class dictatorship'.¹¹ This meant that, although the League had also rejected the United Front proposals at the same conference out of a sense of loyalty to the Labour party – the NJC had rebuked the CPGB's approach in March - the majorities on the NEC and NJC were still greatly perturbed.

So far as foreign policy was concerned, the Socialist League's position was no less radical. Cripps followed those on the far left - John Strachey and his allies who formed the British Anti-War Movement (BAWM) in late 1932 – in expressing a socialist disillusionment with collective security and suggesting that the working classes should organise mass resistance to prevent their capitalist elites from engaging in war.¹² Accordingly, Cripps argued that the countries in the League, including Britain, were 'riveting capitalism upon the neck of a protesting world' and he endorsed the idea of a general strike.¹³ Trevelyan successfully advanced a resolution to this effect on behalf of the Socialist League at the party conference in October 1933. Nevertheless since the BAWM was simultaneously banned from affiliation with the Labour party because of its links with the CPGB, it was clear that the Socialist League was treading a fine line.

⁹ Ibid, p.42.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.52. See also S.Cripps, 'Democracy and Dictatorship', *Political Quarterly*, 4/4 (October-December 1933), pp. 467-481.

¹¹ See, for example, R.P.Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* (1935), p. xvi, quoted in D.Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals, and the Quest for Unity, 1884-1939* (Cambridge, 1992), p.159.

¹² Pugh, 'Pacifism and Politics', p.646.

¹³ S.Cripps, 'Your Weapon against War', *New Clarion*, March 1933, quoted in Bryant, *Cripps*, p.118.

In early 1934 the attitudes of Cripps and the Socialist League became more seriously at odds with the NEC-NJC/NCL line. It had long followed a tradition of thought on the Left, running from J.A.Hobson through to Brailsford, in treating capitalism and imperialism practically synonymously as a fundamentally inadequate system of relations between classes and nations. Now Cripps reasoned that fascism, with its militarism, oppression, and insatiable territorial ambitions, was an extreme example of this phenomenon.¹⁴ He set out to create a stir, and thus strengthen his credentials as a spokesman for the Left of the party, by asserting that he foresaw a very considerable danger of fascism, not just capitalism or imperialism, in Britain itself. Along with Laski¹⁵ he had begun to develop these arguments the previous year. After a meeting with Cripps, Dalton described with exasperation how he saw 'fascism peeping out everywhere in this country'.¹⁶ It was not until 6 January 1934, though, that he aired these assertions publicly in his so-called 'Buckingham Palace' speech. He began by reiterating the policies that the Socialist League had been advocating since the time of their Whitsun conference in 1933. The Labour party, he contended, had to be 'honest and frank' about its plans on forming a government to introduce quickly constitutional and economic reforms that were aimed particularly at abolishing the House of Lords and curtailing the influence of the City of London and were so drastic that there would be 'no doubt that we shall have to overcome opposition from Buckingham Palace and other places as well'. Now, however, Cripps went further by arguing that such a course was necessary in order to stave off the threat of fascism. He asserted that 'fascism is the last stage of capitalism'; the phase

¹⁴ Blaazer, *Popular Front*, p.157.

¹⁵ *New Clarion*, 23 September 1933, quoted *ibid*, p. 156.

¹⁶ Dalton diary, 4 May 1933.

into which capitalism had been forced by economic pressure to control its industries and to suppress all working-class opinions and the political and social struggles of the workers. Although Cripps claimed that this was, in a sense, a 'necessary phase in almost every country in the world before we can emerge into a socialist or communist state', he held 'the grave danger of fascism is that it will precipitate a world war which may well end civilisation and there may be nothing to socialise when the war is over'. Incredibly, Cripps even argued that the National government was gradually approaching a fascist ideology. Notably, he contended that 'there are a number, especially of the younger people, in the National government who would willingly have what I can only call a country gentleman type of fascism, that is a benevolent suppression of working-class opinion'.¹⁷

From this juncture it was but a logical step for Cripps to argue that the League of Nations was controlled not just by capitalist but by potentially fascist governments, and thus should not be supported. He maintained that he would still rely for national security on a plan of pooled security, formed from a nucleus of nations prepared to accept 'such a derogation from their national sovereignty as pooled security necessarily implies', and move towards an elimination of national armaments, the substitution of an international defensive force and the acceptance of arbitration. In Cripps's view, however, such a bloc would have to be based firmly on the ideology of international socialism, and would, therefore, initially attract the Soviet Union and the Scandinavian socialist governments.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 January 1934.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 12 January 1934; *The Scotsman*, 15 January 1934.

On 25 January the NEC formally censured and repudiated Cripps's advocacy of such drastic domestic reforms.¹⁹ Nevertheless from this point onwards, Cripps advanced his arguments with increasing vigour.²⁰ He added detail to his analysis of the burgeoning fascism of the National government. The Socialist League's statement of policy *Forward to Socialism* presented to its conference in June 1934 reiterated the argument that 'fascism is growing rapidly in our midst, not in the number of people wearing black shirts, but in the minds and actions of the ruling classes and of the government itself'. It went on to contend that the 'police forces are being rapidly militarised and placed in the hands of "property-class-conscious" leaders' and that the 'air force is being made into a "class-proof" military arm', while the 'government is openly pursuing the reorganisation of agriculture on a fascist "corporate state" basis, guaranteeing interest and profit to the private owners at the expense of the farm workers and the consumers'. In response it argued that a detailed 'five year plan of socialisation' was needed. After the initial socialisation of the land and the banks – accompanied by the state control of overseas trade - that of transport, mines, gas, electricity and power, iron and steel, munitions and heavy chemicals, cotton and wool, shipbuilding and agriculture would follow. The essential corollary – that the 'anchor of the foreign policy of a socialist government must be its relationship to the Soviet Union' - was also emphasised.²¹

At the party conference in October 1934 the Socialist League was unsuccessful when it proposed this programme as an alternative to the National Executive's *For Socialism and Peace*, with its commitment to a much more limited plan of

¹⁹ NEC minutes, 25 January 1934.

²⁰ In his 'Note on Year 1934' Dalton recorded in his diary that Cripps' 'oratorical gaffes have continued, at intervals, throughout the year'.

nationalisation and a foreign policy based firmly on the League of Nations. Nevertheless as the international climate worsened during the following year, Cripps's criticism of the National government continued unabated.

In the pamphlet, *National Fascism in Britain*, published in May 1935, Cripps argued that the 'first definite and conscious step towards fascism in Britain' had been the Trades Disputes Act of 1927. The election of 1931 was 'essentially fascist in nature', indeed 'evidence of the greater efforts of the capitalists to induce the workers by fair means or foul to return to power a solid capitalist block'. The forces of capitalism had such a triumph at the polls that 'there was no need for any formal, personal dictatorship' or for any 'immediate measure to limit the powers of the representative assembly', because under the cover of a 'democratic government a slow and easily masked beginning could be made towards the corporate state'. Cripps claimed that there were now many examples of protective economic nationalism, imperialism, industrial organisation on a voluntary basis, and subsidies to capitalists in contrast to 'the discipline imposed on the workers by the means test'. He also noted ominously that there had been an increase in ministerial legislation and the removal of potentially contentious issues, such as unemployment, from the control of parliament. Cripps maintained that Britain had not 'emerged as yet into the full flower of fascism, or anything like it, nor have we lost our democratic rights, but he firmly conveyed his assertion 'that we have moved definitely along the path towards the corporate state, not only in actual legislation and methods of government, but above all, in the psychology and ideology of our rulers'. He did not suggest that the workers were being disciplined 'viciously and ruthlessly as in Germany and Italy', but rather 'gently

²¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 14 May 1934.

and firmly as one would expect from a country-gentleman fascism in Britain' where 'coloured shirts are not necessary and are embarrassingly obvious'.²²

This reading of the domestic political situation meant that Cripps distrusted the National government to such an extent that he opposed any moves that might seem to support it by calling for League sanctions against Italy to check its impending aggression in Abyssinia. At the annual conference of the Socialist League in June 1935 Cripps had in a lengthy and heated debate defeated the arguments put forward by J.T.Murphy, the League's General Secretary, in support of the system of collective security. He had thus clarified the Socialist League's policy of opposition to any war fought by the National government on the basis that it would be an imperialist one ahead of this critical juncture.²³ Now at the meeting of Labour's three Executives on 3-4 September 1935 he registered his dissent from the majority view favouring the use of economic, financial and military sanctions against Italy, though he curiously did not attend the second day of discussions when the vote was taken on the draft resolution.²⁴ Afterwards he publicly derided what he considered to be the low motives that moved such governments as the National government in Britain. He claimed they followed a logic that if 'it is considered important enough for this country and France, Italy will be stopped, if necessary by armed force'. However, if 'as in the case of Japan, it is not considered sufficiently important in view of naval risks, Italy will be allowed to go on'. There was clearly no sense in 'risking the lives of the workers of this country' for such dubious ends. Cripps pointed out that if the League governments attempted to stop Mussolini their actions would be hypocritical. He asked rhetorically, how 'can

²² *Manchester Guardian*, 3 May 1935; *Daily Telegraph*, 2 May 1935.

²³ Estorick, *Cripps*, p.140; Bryant, *Cripps*, p. 122.

²⁴ NEC minutes, 3,4 September 1935; Dalton diary, 3,4 September 1935.

those who seized the Transvaal by force of arms deny him [Mussolini] the right to seize Ethiopia in the same way and for the same reason'.²⁵

After 11 September, when it became clear that the National government was intent on checking Italy through the League, Cripps's criticism of this policy intensified. There was now a very real danger that 'we shall be led under the banner of the League to another imperialist war'²⁶ and, since the NEC and NCL majorities were appearing to support it, Cripps saw a real opportunity to make political gains for himself and the Socialist League. With the party conference less than a month away and a general election widely expected before the end of the year Cripps decided to resign from the National Executive to which he had been elected the previous year 'in order to show people where I stood'.²⁷ He sought to embarrass that body, polarise discussion and thereby strengthen his own position at a time when Lansbury's resignation appeared likely.

Cripps and the Socialist League now presented themselves, in contrast to the NEC-NCL line, as continuing to hold the defeat of the National government at home as their first priority. As Cripps put it, 'however bitter we may feel against fascism, however sympathetic we are with Ethiopia' the 'central feature of our action that matters most is our determination to dislodge an imperial government in this country'.²⁸ Cripps still claimed that he would 'support armaments and military action...if these were being used by a group of socialist states to support an international socialist order against capitalist aggression'.²⁹ However, since the Soviet

²⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 7 September 1935.

²⁶ Cripps to his father, Lord Parmoor, quoted in Estorick, *Cripps*, p. 141

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 16 September 1935.

²⁹ *Bristol Evening Post*, 21 September 1935.

government – now a member of the League – was in favour of sanctions, Cripps' arguments for a kind of 'socialist' League of Nations lacked much credibility. Indeed, Trevelyan – the mover of the Hastings war resistance resolution - now asserted that 'if Russia will act too, I think it our socialist... duty to approve sanctions'.³⁰ Cripps also spoke vaguely of 'working-class sanctions' – the refusal to provide goods and services from or to buy them from Italy – and how these might check Mussolini's aggression.³¹ Essentially, however, he did not offer an alternative foreign policy vision to match that of the three Executives. Rather in the lead up to the party conference he pitted the Socialist League against the majority NEC-NCL line by contending:

The question is, shall the workers of Great Britain be inveigled into the support of an imperialist system by specious excuses based on the sham the League of Nations now is, or shall they be urged to stand firm and determined against capitalism and imperialism in all its forms, utilising the present golden opportunity to dislodge their own capitalist government rather than offering it their support.³²

³⁰ Trevelyan to Cripps, 19 September 1935, C.P. Trevelyan papers, 149.

³¹ *Bristol Evening Post*, 21 September 1935; *Manchester Guardian*, 23 September 1935.

³² *Bristol Evening Post*, 21 September 1935.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CASE FOR A SANCTIONIST LEAGUE OF NATIONS

From 1933 Henderson had begun to convert the Labour party to support for a sanctionist League of Nations. Initially he merely contended in *Labour's Foreign Policy* that an international League police force should be empowered to use economic and military sanctions to restrain an aggressor nation. However, in *War and Peace*, passed by the 1934 party conference, he went further in tentatively asserting that the individual member states *might* have to use *their own* military forces on behalf of the League. Nevertheless, as Henderson's health subsequently failed, it fell to others – Dalton, Citrine, Bevin and Attlee – to demand in September 1935 that Britain should actually impose military as well as economic sanctions against Italy.

While most accounts have readily acknowledged that the need for an ultimate reliance on force was an undercurrent in Henderson's thought, they have often failed to appreciate his importance in shaping Labour's foreign policy in the years 1933-4. They stress only his presidency of the Disarmament Conference and follow a line given by Dalton who wrote that by the end of 1932 with his lengthy absences in Geneva he began to lose 'a good deal of his old ascendancy' over the party's National Executive.¹ However, his resignation as party leader in October 1932 following a

¹ Dalton diary, 8 October 1932 [B.Pimlott (ed.), *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton 1918-40, 1945-60* (1986), p. 168]. M.A.Hamilton, *Arthur Henderson* (1937), ch. 16, F.Leventhal, *Arthur Henderson* (Manchester, 1989), ch. 6, and Wrigley, *Henderson*, pp.180-3, focus on Henderson's activities at the Disarmament Conference in the years 1932-4 and give the impression that his influence was otherwise limited. Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, pp. 73-5, conveys a sense of the importance of *War and Peace*, but does not identify Henderson, or indeed anyone else, as its chief author. H.A.Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889: Volume III 1934-51* (Oxford, 1994), p. 125 rightly perceives that the introduction of *War and Peace* marked a 'fundamental revision of the foreign policy

dismal personal reception at the Leicester conference of that year showed only that he did not share the majority view, which after the debacle of 1931 thought that a considerable rethink and reformulation of *domestic*, particularly economic, policy was needed. His influence over *foreign policy* nevertheless remained considerable and, as party secretary until the end of 1934, he was in a strong position to organise the arduous process of clarifying how Labour's League of Nations foreign policy would work in a deteriorating international environment.

Henderson continued to draw much of his inspiration from the ACIQ, as he had done since the early 1920s. From November 1932 the Advisory Committee had moved in advance of the party and began to argue that the time was apt for a reconsideration of Labour's League policy in light of the deteriorating international environment.² As a result of these discussions, the ACIQ had commissioned Woolf to draft two memoranda. In the first of these, he comprehensively outlined the need for a re-examination of Labour's foreign policy. In the second he argued explicitly that, in these circumstances, Labour should assert its commitment to a 'strong' League of Nations. At this stage Woolf only specified that this would involve economic sanctions,³ but the Committee repeatedly broached the subject of military sanctions at its fortnightly meetings.⁴

Henderson's *Labour's Foreign Policy* followed the same line of reasoning as Woolf's memoranda, but offered more detailed proposals for strengthening the League. At the outset Henderson explained that the 'extremely grave' international

of the Labour movement'. He argues, however, that 'the General Council, led by Bevin and Citrine, was mainly responsible for it'.

² ACIQ minutes, 9 November, 21 December 1932, 15 February, 1 March 1933.

³ ACIQ memoranda Nos. 431A, March 1933; 433A, April 1933. It is possible to identify Woolf as the author by reference to the ACIQ minutes, 15 March 1933, 3 May 1933, and from D. Wilson, *Leonard Woolf: A Political Biography* (1978), p. 183.

situation had necessitated a reappraisal of foreign policy issues. There was an actual 'state of war in the Far East', 'increasing talk of war in Europe' where Germany was particularly 'menacing', and 'the unwillingness of heavily armed states to come to come to serious grips with the disarmament problem'. He then contended that since it was not the League machinery that had failed but the member governments, a Labour government would pass a Peace Act to detail the procedure binding on any British government in the settlement of disputes. For the first time he argued that 'a drastic reduction of national armaments by international agreement', and ultimately even the 'total abolition of all national armed forces', would be compatible with 'pooled security' through the creation of an 'international police force under the League of Nations'. Whereas in the past he had projected a public air of ambiguity on the issue, he now made it clear that he subscribed to an interpretation of Article XVI of the League Covenant which provided for 'joint action – economic, financial, and, if necessary, military – by members of the League against any state which violated its obligations and resorted to war'.⁵

Henderson introduced this document as the basis of Labour's League and disarmament policy at the 1933 party conference at Hastings.⁶ Although its central provisions were nullified by the passage of Trevelyan's war resistance resolution, Henderson was not discouraged. Rather his efforts to commit the party to a sanctionist League of Nations policy assumed greater urgency. On 23 January 1934 the NJC called for a meeting of Labour's three Executives on 28 February to discuss the

⁴ See, for instance, ACIQ minutes, 1, 15 March, 17, 31 May, 21 June 1933.

⁵ Henderson, *Labour's Foreign Policy*, pp. 1, 19-22, 5.

⁶ *LPACR*, 1933, pp. 189-91.

party's foreign policy.⁷ The 1933 party conference had resolved that the Labour movement should 'frame a comprehensive restatement of Labour's attitude to this country's international relations'.⁸ When the National Executive met on 27 February to discuss its position ahead of the joint meeting, Henderson was adamant that since the Hastings resolution 'did not differentiate between wars of aggression and conquest and such measures as might be necessary by reason of our obligations to the League of Nations', the need for 'a clarification was obvious'. He produced a memorandum for this meeting which adumbrated the line eventually taken in *War and Peace* in reconciling war resistance with Labour's broader foreign policy based on support for the League of Nations. It stated:

The collective peace system based on the Covenant and the Paris Pact forms a connected whole in which the pledge to refrain from war, community judgement on what constitutes aggression or resort to war, sanctions, peaceful settlement of disputes and disarmament are integral parts. That is why it is impossible to separate the problem of war resistance from the wider problem of organising peace of which it is one aspect.⁹

The meeting of the three Executives on 28 February decided to set up a joint sub-committee comprising the chairmen and secretaries of the three bodies to consider the question in detail.¹⁰ Henderson – a member in his capacity as NEC secretary – dominated the committee on which Walter Smith (NEC Chairman), Attlee (substituting for the ill Lansbury as PLP chairman), H. Scott Lindsay (PLP Secretary), Conley and Citrine (respectively Chairman and Secretary of the TUC General Council) also sat. By the time the three Executives met again on 28 June a provisional

⁷ NJC minutes, 23 January 1934.

⁸ *LPACR*, 1933, p. 224.

⁹ NEC minutes, 27 February 1934.

¹⁰ NEC minutes, 28 February 1934; TUC General Council minutes, 28 February 1934.

draft of *War and Peace* had been written which reiterated the interpretation of Britain's commitment to the League given in *Labour's Foreign Policy* and reconciled this, just as Henderson had earlier indicated, with war resistance. Labour's ultimate foreign policy aim was presented as the creation of a 'co-operative world commonwealth' with the 'total disarmament of all nations...and the creation of an international police force' as considerable milestones towards this goal. However, this document now allowed for the possibility that in the period before these measures could be effected 'there might be circumstances under which the government of Great Britain might have to use its military and naval forces in support of the League in restraining an aggressor nation'. A Peace Act introduced in all League countries would devolve three duties upon their peoples and ensure that war resistance would only apply to a government that had acted independently of the League:

Arbitration-Insistence – the duty to insist that our Government settle all its disputes by peaceful means and eschew force.

Sanctions-Assistance – the duty unflinchingly to support our Government in all the risks and consequences of fulfilling its duty to take part in collective action against a peace-breaker.

War-Resistance – the refusal to accept our Government's unsupported claim to be using force in self-defence; insistence on submitting their claim to the test of international judgement, or of willingness to arbitrate; refusal to support or serve our Government if it were condemned as an aggressor by the League or designated itself as an aggressor by becoming involved in war after refusing arbitration.

At the joint meeting Henderson defended this document as points of issue were raised by, amongst others, Dalton, Attlee and Bevin. Although 'in some instances amendments were proposed and agreed', it remained essentially the same policy

statement that Henderson introduced at the party conference in October.¹¹ After reaching this crucial juncture, however, Henderson's influence on Labour's foreign policy began to wane; his already poor health deteriorated further. Now the initiative in the formulation of a sanctionist League policy passed to Dalton, Attlee, Bevin and Citrine.

Dalton, with his power base on the NEC, had found himself increasingly allied with Citrine and Bevin on the NJC/NCL since 1931. They shared a desire to develop a range of clearly defined, though essentially moderate, policies – not merely on foreign affairs - for the party to implement once elected. Attlee's involvement with this triumvirate was, however, in some ways more surprising. He had been involved with the Socialist League in 1932¹² and had worked closely with the leftist Lansbury and Cripps in the Commons. It was only after 1933 with perhaps a growing consciousness of an impending general election that his stance, mirroring that of the party as a whole, became more explicitly moderate.¹³ In any case, by October 1934 Dalton, Bevin, Citrine and Attlee had themselves come to appreciate the danger of potential aggression in Europe and were firmly behind the line taken in *War and Peace*.

Dalton had the longest standing interest in foreign affairs, which according to his biographer stemmed from his experiences on the French and Italian fronts during the Great War. He devoted a great deal of his attention to the subject in the 1920s and became Parliamentary Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the 1929-31 government. Indeed it seems likely that his ultimate political ambition was to become

¹¹ NEC minutes, 28 June 1934; TUC General Council minutes, 28 June 1934; *LPACR*, 1934, pp. 189-91.

¹² Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, p. 46.

¹³ Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, pp.27-8, comments on the Labour party's adoption of a more moderate stance in 1933-4.

foreign secretary.¹⁴ Moreover, as with Henderson, whom he greatly admired, Dalton had been long inclined towards a strong League of Nations policy. He had become a passionate advocate of the League after he visited Geneva in summer 1925.¹⁵ In *Towards the Peace of Nations*, the book he wrote in 1928 to establish his reputation as an authority on foreign policy, he described the League's machinery as 'the best the world has ever had as an instrument of international co-operation'. He maintained, of course, that multilateral disarmament, or 'disarmament all round' was its ultimate aim, but denigrated the idea of a moral force League. He asserted that if a 'high moral tone is to be the League's only weapon against the material force of an aggressor, its bluff will soon be called'. To him it was clear that to 'think as some sentimentalists appear to do, that we can build a new international order without any sanctions whatever, is not to think at all'. He went further than many in the party in explicitly acknowledging that before this could be realised the League would have to be equipped with the economic and military weapons necessary to police the world. In particular he thought that national air forces should be replaced by an international air force under the control of the League Council.¹⁶

His first hand experience of Hitler's Nazi regime added a tangible reality to this earlier inclination that force might be essential to deter aggressors. During a four-day visit to Germany in April 1933 Dalton was overwhelmed not only by an atmosphere of domestic persecution, but also the potential external danger Germany presented. 'Germany is horrible' he wrote in his diary 'a European war must be

¹⁴ Pimlott, *Dalton*, p.182.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.185.

¹⁶ H.Dalton, *Towards the Peace of Nations* (1928), pp. 114, 211, 290.

counted now among the possibilities of the next ten years'.¹⁷ In August 1933 Dalton noted the implications of this: 'If economic sanctions failed, it might be necessary for the League to resort to military sanctions as well.'¹⁸ This, however, was the draft of a speech that he did not deliver. Instead at the Conference of the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) in Paris in late August 1933, Dalton expressed the view that 'economic and financial sanctions are strong enough' to check an aggressor government and that consequently 'military sanctions would not be necessary'. He qualified this in a limited way by explaining that the 'need for military sanctions only arises out of the possible failure of a united world to apply economic and financial sanctions to the full'.¹⁹

Dalton's reluctance to make his views explicit was due to a pragmatic desire not to isolate himself from the mainstream of a party that did not wholly share the views of Henderson.²⁰ At the 1933 party conference Dalton accepted Trevelyan's war resistance resolution on behalf of the Executive, perhaps glad to note afterwards that 'no first-class discords' developed,²¹ even if the resolution itself was 'a bit brash'.²² In *Practical Socialism for Britain*, which he wrote in summer 1934,²³ Dalton chose to remain on safe Labour ground so far as foreign policy was concerned. Within his broad advocacy of an international disarmament agreement affording Germany equal treatment, an international police force and the international control of civil aviation, he stressed that 'collective economic and financial pressure, or even the threat of it, if known to be meant seriously, would, in nearly all hypothetical cases, halt an intruding

¹⁷ Dalton diary, 27,28,29,30 April 1933; Dalton, *Fateful Years*, pp.37-41.

¹⁸ Dalton papers II 6/2.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Pimlott, *Dalton*, pp. 226-8.

²¹ Dalton diary, 29 September to 6 October 1933 [Pimlott, *Political diary*, p. 180].

²² Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p.53.

aggressor in his tracks'. He argued that these would have deterred the Japanese aggression.²⁴ He did not speak on foreign affairs at the 1934 party conference, but was suitably happy that the party 'had moved a long way since the Hastings conference the year before'.²⁵

Even if he had not, as yet, forcefully enunciated his views, Dalton nevertheless became steadily more infuriated with those differing from Henderson's line on the League. In particular he was concerned with the threat from Cripps, whose leftist leanings on all matters, including foreign policy, he felt to be fundamentally at odds with his own efforts to give the party a moderate stance likely to appeal to the electorate. After a meeting in May 1933 Dalton commented that Cripps had 'no judgement at all and oversimplifies everything into capitalists and workers'. He thought that he was 'becoming a dangerous political lunatic' and that it 'may become a duty to prevent him from holding any influential position in the party'.²⁶ After Cripps was called before the NEC in January 1934 to account for his 'Buckingham Palace' speech, Dalton noted in his diary the conviction that Cripps 'is damaging the party electorally'. He himself had made 'a violent – perhaps too violent – speech – asking that this stream of oratorical ineptitudes should now cease'.²⁷ Later that month he noted 'another outrageous speech by Cripps' in which he claimed that in the case of a capitalist war under Locarno the Labour party would do its utmost to organise a general strike. In exasperation Dalton recorded: 'every word wrong'.²⁸ His developing feud with Cripps was, of course, as much about politics as it was about policy. He

²³ 'Note on Year 1934', Dalton diary.

²⁴ H. Dalton, *Practical Socialism in Britain* (1935), pp. 368-375.

²⁵ Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p. 53.

²⁶ Dalton diary, 4 May 1933.

²⁷ Dalton diary, 19 January 1934 [Pimlott, *Political Diary*, p. 181].

²⁸ Dalton diary, 22 January 1934 [Pimlott, *Political Diary*, p. 182].

noted with regret that Lansbury was 'opposed' to the foreign policy of *War and Peace* and 'always shifts back into his old non-resistance attitude', but clearly found Lansbury's pacifism less objectionable than Cripps' position. Dalton and Cripps were both rising figures in Labour's second generation jostling for control of the party. In this struggle Dalton, who was clearly desperate not to be displaced by someone who had done nothing for the party before the 1930s, always looked like having the upper hand. He had built up a formidable power base on the NEC, which enabled him successfully to confront Cripps despite his combined advantage of being one of the foremost MPs on the opposition benches as well as chairman of the Socialist League.

By September 1934 Citrine, the General Secretary of the TUC, was also outspoken in his support of Henderson's *War and Peace* policy. He had been President of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) since 1928, but had shown little interest in foreign policy before the mid 1930s. Indeed, his initial reaction to the rise of Hitler was to fear that a similar dictatorship might emerge in Britain. Following the lead given by the NJC's *Democracy versus Dictatorship* in March 1933,²⁹ Citrine argued that he was as concerned about a left-wing dictatorship arising in reaction to fascism - through the CPGB's demands for a United Front - as he was about the development of a fascist dictatorship itself. In May 1933 he wrote that Hitlerism 'furnishes an object lesson' and that we must not be 'too complacent'. It meant that it was now necessary 'to clear our own minds as to whether we really believe in democratic institutions'. Clearly with the radical policies of Cripps and the Socialist League in mind, Citrine added that there were far 'too many people in the

²⁹ *Democracy versus Dictatorship*, 24 March 1933. Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, pp. 47-48 stresses that at this time the trade unionists were concerned with the internal, rather than the external, threat from fascism.

Labour movement... scornful of parliamentary government' and it was 'about time we cleared the decks for the settlement of the issue of democracy or dictatorship'. He also acknowledged the 'war spirit' in Germany, but did not dwell on this point.³⁰ Likewise, at the Congress of the IFTU on 30 July 1933 he spoke of the 'dangers of fascism, which, if not checked, would bring about war'.³¹

At this stage Citrine's main concerns were with the domestic consequences of this international upheaval. For the TUC meeting in September 1933 he produced a document on *Dictatorships and the Trade Union Movement*, which questioned whether the 'rise of a dictatorship in Germany may hold certain lessons for us', and whether 'there was any great similarity...between the factors which produced a dictatorship in Germany and the conditions obtaining in Great Britain'. 'Only after he concluded here that Britain did not share the political, economic and social conditions that had inclined Germany towards dictatorship did Citrine become seriously concerned with the international threat from fascism'.³²

Following his involvement between February and June 1934 on the joint sub-committee that Henderson led in producing *War and Peace*, Citrine stated unequivocally the case for a sanctionist League policy when introducing the resolution at the Weymouth TUC in September 1934. He did this by first criticising the opposing views. He asserted the fallacy of the belief that it is not possible to 'organise peace under competitive capitalism'. The 'whole purpose of the labour movement', he contended, 'is based upon the assumption that we can do something in combination to

³⁰ W. Citrine, 'Foreword' in J. Compton, *Down with Fascism*. Citrine had previously recorded his visit to Berlin in February 1933 for an Executive meeting of the IFTU when he had been informed explicitly that Hitler's eventual plan was to overturn the Versailles Treaty by force if necessary: Citrine papers 1/14.

³¹ *TUCAR*, 1933, pp. 436-7.

³² *Ibid*, pp. 318-325, for Citrine's introduction of the report; pp. 425-435, for the document itself.

restrain other elements now operating under the capitalist system'. He also rebuked the commitment to a general strike, doubting the wisdom 'of declaring in advance the precise way in which we would meet, in unknown circumstances and in an unknown state of public mind and public temper, the menace of war by means of a general strike'. Instead he thought it more sensible simply to stand by 'our Standing Order which definitely pledges us to a conference in the event of war being imminent', as *War and Peace* suggested. He disparaged the idea that support of the League would really mean 'committing us behind the various capital states in the furtherance of capitalist wars'. It was clear that 'in a capitalist world...you are bound to make use of those influences inside capitalism which for one reason or another at a particular time want to maintain peace'. This was surely what motivated Russia – the 'one state in the world which claims to be applying socialist principles' - to apply for membership of the League. He was then clear in specifying the overriding need for an ultimate reliance on force. Envisaging the scenario of a Japanese attack on Russia he said:

...Do you think that Japan is going to be restrained by a resolution of the League of Nations? Do you think that economic sanctions would be sufficient to restrain Japan? Why, the mechanism of modern war is such that before your economic sanctions could take effect war would be well under way. It is no use talking about cutting off commodities and financial assistance to a country. I am not going to argue it would be of no consequence because it would be in a long-range policy. But the first acts aggression would be committed. The aeroplanes would be passing overhead and dropping their bombs on the opponent's territory. Therefore you come, by the sheer logic of the case, to the only way in which you can resist an aggressor determined to take no notice of your resolution and moral influence. You can only restrain him by force.³³

³³ *TUCAR*, 1934, pp.334-8.

An appreciation of the gravity of the international environment clearly underlined his position. According to his autobiography he made a lecture tour of the United States in September 1934 'specially for the purpose of bringing home to American trade unionists that unless the aggressors were induced to abandon their designs war on a world-wide scale was certain to break out'. In particular he was fearful 'that Germany was rapidly approaching a war footing'.³⁴

Similarly Bevin, the General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), also placed himself - and the block vote of the largest union - firmly behind Henderson's *War and Peace* policy by the time of the TUC meeting in September 1934. He had not given foreign affairs much thought before 1933. After the war resistance resolution was passed at Hastings, his impassioned opposition to the Socialist League's arrogance in presuming to summon the trade unions to strike was far more prominent than any positive conception of how Labour's foreign policy might work. In August 1932 following a visit to Prague for the biennial conference of the International Transport Worker's Federation he had noted his impression that 'the workers of the European countries have little opposition left in them'.³⁵ Now speaking at the Executive Council of the TGWU immediately after the 1933 Labour party conference, Bevin explained his view that a general strike could never work in practice. Pointedly he asked:

Who and what is there to strike? Trade unionism has been destroyed in Italy and Germany; practically speaking it does not exist in France; it is extremely weak in the USA... while there is no possibility of a general strike against the Russian government in the event of war. What is left? Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark and Holland; virtually these are the only

³⁴ Citrine, *Men and Work*, pp.346-9.

³⁵ *TGWU General Secretary's Quarterly Report*, August 1932, quoted in A.Bullock, *Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, Volume I (1960), pp. 508-9.

countries in which any strong trade union organisations exist. Ought we, in the light of these facts, to go on talking glibly, misleading ourselves as to what we could do with the general strike weapon in the event of a world war.³⁶

He was, therefore, no doubt pleased when Henderson guided the three Executives' joint sub-committee towards a revision of the commitment to a general strike. By now, the Austrian social democrats and trade unions, with whom the NJC had been in close contact during autumn 1933, had been suppressed in a ruthless and bloody manner.³⁷ He was more than willing to deride the idea of a general strike when arguing on behalf of *War and Peace* at the 1934 TUC. He asked how, with 'the whole world in a fluid state', could Congress 'determine what another Congress is going to do in five years time, or in two years time'? The obligation, under the Standing Orders, to call a conference in the event of war was clearly sufficient.³⁸

Significantly, the looming international danger - he argued that dictatorships 'have never succeeded economically' and that his 'great fear of Mussolini, and of Hitler and German militarism, is that...they will turn to war as an outlet for their economic difficulty at home' - meant that he now endorsed the overt 'pledge...to collective security' contained in *War and Peace*.³⁹ The following month at the party conference in Southport Bevin made his support for Henderson's sanctionist League policy explicit. He argued that:

To support the League... and not back it with power in certain eventualities, seems to me to be like a man entering a union on condition that under no circumstances will you ever ask him to

³⁶ *TGWU General Secretary's Quarterly Report*, November 1933, quoted *ibid*, p. 550.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp.546-50. My interpretation here differs from that offered by Bullock. Whereas I emphasise the importance of Henderson in the formulation of *War and Peace*, Bullock contends that so far as the commitment to a general strike was concerned, it was 'the trade union leaders who killed this...suggestion once and for all'.

³⁸ *TUCAR*, 1934, pp. 331-2.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 332.

strike, and that in the event of the Executive having to take a decision, the individual could come to his own conclusion.⁴⁰

Even more so than Citrine and Bevin, Attlee only slowly perceived the need to reconsider the party's foreign policy as a result of the deteriorating international environment and the rise of Hitler.⁴¹ His membership of the joint sub-committee that drafted *War and Peace* under Henderson's guidance was clearly an educative experience. When Attlee came to speak on behalf of the resolution at the 1934 party conference he explained how in 'the light of fresh experience' he renounced his earlier support of unilateral disarmament. He was aware of the potential threat of war. He remarked that it was easier 'to believe in unilateral disarmament when you live in England than it is for people living on the continent'. Attlee stressed Labour's long-term aspiration to create a 'world state' or Commonwealth and to internationalise aviation so as to 'supersede all other armed forces'. It was in this context that he supported 'collective security' or 'sanctions in the hands of the League'.⁴² In a pamphlet entitled *An International Police Force* Attlee wrote in a similar way of a 'world authority' that 'must be prepared in the last resort to enforce its decisions by sanctions' and even made it clear that he supported the full range of sanctions provided for under Article XVI of the League Covenant. He argued that 'whatever may be the force of public opinion' and 'the possibilities of financial and trade embargoes, there must be an eventual possibility of armed intervention against an aggressor'. He stressed that this armed force should be concentrated in a supranational

⁴⁰ *LPCAR*, 1934, pp. 170-1.

⁴¹ K.Harris, *Attlee* (1982), p. 115, acknowledges that 'Attlee reacted more slowly than some of his colleagues...to the need to reconsider the party's foreign policy in the light of the rise of Hitler'. T.Burridge, *Clement Attlee: A Political Biography* (1985), p. 99, overlooks this point and rather obliquely stresses that in the years 1931-5 the 'distinctiveness of Attlee's approach' to foreign affairs became apparent.

authority, to the exclusion of the national armies, navies and air forces, but did not shy away from the question of its use against a recalcitrant state. He was particularly keen to see the creation of an international air force and presented detailed proposals about the way in which it should be 'organised, constituted and controlled'.⁴³

During the first half of 1935 these advocates of a sanctionist League of Nations policy – Dalton, Citrine, Bevin and Attlee - were preoccupied with the threat posed by Hitler. They largely ignored the brewing Italian-Abyssinian discord despite being informed about the seriousness of the situation by the ACIQ. After a series of discussions the committee had called upon Noel-Baker to draft a memorandum.⁴⁴ Ominously, this warned that there has 'never been any dispute between two powers in which the fundamental principles of the Covenant were so clearly at stake'.⁴⁵

Significantly, however, as Dalton, Citrine and Bevin perceived the gravity of the German threat they also realised that support for a sanctionist League necessitated support for British rearmament. In March-April 1935 Dalton spent three weeks in Czechoslovakia – 'the model democracy of central Europe' - and claimed that he 'came back...with a heightened sense of the war danger' because 'Benés and other Czech leaders had no doubt of Hitler's designs'.⁴⁶ Reflecting the views he expressed at the time, Dalton recalled in his memoirs that from the time that Hitler's claim to have reached air parity with Britain was made public on 3 April 1935 'I was sure that, though we must also negotiate, we must also immediately rearm'. On this matter he

⁴² *LPACR*, 1934, pp.174-5.

⁴³ C.R. Attlee, *An International Police Force* (1934).

⁴⁴ *ACIQ minutes*, 13, 27 February, 13, 27 March, 10 April 1935.

⁴⁵ *ACIQ memorandum*, No. 455A, April 1935. It is possible to identify Noel Baker as the author by reference to *ACIQ minutes*, 13 February 1935.

⁴⁶ Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p.61.

now began to work 'steadily both with Bevin and Citrine'.⁴⁷ They understood, as Citrine put it in his autobiography, that because the 'League had no forces of its own...it was patent...that it must rely on those of its member states who were ready and capable of shouldering the major responsibility of defending the collective security we talked so much about'.⁴⁸

War and Peace had primarily conceived sanctionist action being carried out through some kind of League of Nations police force, and had only very cautiously broached the possibility of Britain actually using *its own* armed forces on behalf of the League to check aggression. Although the creation of an international force was, in many respects, impracticable, it was theoretically consistent with the achievement of national disarmament – Labour's overriding foreign policy objective. The PLP had accordingly been able to criticise the first measure of the National government's re-armament programme, which had been introduced on 30 July 1934. On this occasion Attlee had condemned the government's policy in traditional Labour terms as:

a policy of rearmament neither necessitated by any new commitment nor calculated to add to the security of the nation, but certain to jeopardise the prospects of international disarmament and to encourage a revival of a dangerous and wasteful competition in preparation for war.⁴⁹

Now, however, Dalton, Citrine and Bevin realised that support for a sanctionist League in the dire international environment necessarily required increased national armaments. Dalton became 'very impatient with the opposite view still held by many of my colleagues'. He understood that the PLP voted against the arms estimates in order to register disapproval of the government's foreign policy rather than to object

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.65.

⁴⁸ Citrine, *Men and Work*, p.350.

to the arms themselves. He recognised, moreover, that ceasing this practice would mean drawing closer to the National government after the half-way point in parliament had been reached, but thought the circumstances justified it. He held that it was 'piffle', not to mention 'damned bad politics', to argue 'in the sorry pass to which we had now come, because we had a damned bad British government therefore the British nation should not be better armed – the arms, one hoped, would outlast the government'.⁵⁰

At a meeting of the three Executives on 21 and 22 May Dalton, supported by Citrine and Bevin, argued that the PLP should abstain rather than vote against the arms estimates. He contended that it was difficult to vote against an increase in the RAF sufficient to give the country at least parity with Germany. He spoke 'vigorously against Hitler' and thought the issue was: are you 'in favour of Hitler having four or five aeroplanes to our one?' After the meeting decided to continue to vote against the arms estimates - apparently because of a conciliatory speech by Hitler - Dalton concluded that the 'way Hitler is not distrusted is disturbing'. It was, by now, abundantly clear that Henderson was marginal; the initiative in the formulation of a sanctionist League policy had passed to the younger generation. Henderson could not accept that rearmament was an essential corollary of support for a sanctionist League. Dalton recorded that he was 'stuck in his eternal rut after Disarmament Conference, and dislikes my attitude'.⁵¹ Perhaps of greater concern to Dalton, Bevin and Citrine, however, was that Attlee - the other prominent advocate of a sanctionist League – refused to support British rearmament. As a front bench spokesman he may have been

⁴⁹ *H.C. Deb*, 292, col. 2366, 30 July 1934.

⁵⁰ Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p.63.

more worried about how this shift could be justified in parliament. He may also have believed that supporting rearmament would have fractured PLP unity.⁵² In any case, at the meeting of the three Executives Attlee made it clear, as he went on to argue in the Commons the following day, that he opposed the arms estimates. He argued that it was not clear whether they had been calculated for a system where 'we are to stand by ourselves or in a system of collective security'.⁵³

Over the next few months the supporters of a sanctionist League began to perceive the importance of the steadily mounting tension between Italy and Abyssinia. From the time when Attlee provoked the first substantial discussion of the matter in the Commons on 7 June 1935 the approach that he, along with Dalton, Bevin and Citrine, would take as hopes of reaching a peaceful settlement faded, became clear. In the first place he stressed that the British government should warn Mussolini that any attempted aggression on his part would be met by strong restraining action through the League. Under Article X of the Covenant, its members were pledged to 'preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political integrity of all members of the League'. A 'clear statement' should, therefore, be drafted to tell Mussolini 'that this government, like other governments, uphold the Covenant against an aggressor state'. Attlee argued there was a need to emphasise that because 'the refusal to accept the League's authority constitutes a refusal by an aggressor... we shall in that event be bound under Article XVI of the Covenant ...to act'. Attlee also maintained that the Italian-Abyssinian tension was important beyond its immediate context. It was 'a test of the reality of the League and the sanctity of the Covenant of

⁵¹ Dalton diary, 21-2 May 1935; Dalton, *Fateful Years*, pp.63-4. The NEC minutes, 21, 22 May 1935, do not detail the debates and give the impression that the meeting was in 'substantial agreement'.

⁵² Harris, *Attlee*, p. 127; J.H.Brookshire, *Clement Attlee* (Manchester, 1995), p. 157.

the League', and provided 'a great opportunity...for re-establishing the authority of the League and the rule of law in Europe'.⁵⁴

The ACIQ continued to play an important role in shaping policy. Indeed, it seems that it was only through the intervention of Noel-Baker that Dalton perceived the significance of the Italian-Abyssinian dispute. Noel-Baker recorded that as late as June Dalton was 'inclined to say that Hitler was so great a danger that we must not quarrel with Mussolini or drive M.[ussolini] into alliance with H.[itler]'. Noel-Baker was, however, close to Dalton, having worked with him at the Foreign Office between 1929 and 1931, when Noel-Baker had been Henderson's Parliamentary Private Secretary. Possibly using as evidence the results of the Peace Ballot, which had yet to be announced but of which Noel-Baker was aware through his involvement with the LNU, he managed to persuade Dalton that this would 'not be the attitude of the party'.⁵⁵

At the end of June the publication of results of the Peace Ballot duly provided a context in which economic, and even military, sanctions against an aggressor nation seemed likely to be acceptable to much of the electorate. Now the ACIQ stepped up its efforts to convince the Labour party to demand such measures against Italy. In July one of their memoranda, again written by Noel-Baker, suggested that the party should push for the introduction of economic and financial sanctions and even broached the idea of an extensive naval blockade. The memorandum argued that if the Royal Navy were to block the Suez Canal and the Straits of Gibraltar, Italy would not be able to

⁵³ Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p. 64; *HC Deb*, 302, cols. 375, 377, 22 May 1935.

⁵⁴ *HC Deb*, 302, col. 2194, 7 June 1935.

⁵⁵ Noel-Baker to Cecil, 21 June 1935, quoted in Whittaker, *Fighter for Peace*, p. 125.

send supplies to Eritrea or the Somaliland.⁵⁶ Shortly afterwards, on 24 July, the trade union dominated NCL called on the British government to declare that so far as the Italian-Abyssinian dispute was concerned it would 'discharge its duties and obligations as a member of the League without fear or favour'.⁵⁷ A fuller statement of the sanctionist League of Nations policy was then given in the resolution drafted by the party's three Executives on 3-4 September 1935. This matched its condemnation of Italy's violation of the 'law of nations' with a commitment to apply sanctions if they were needed. It was clear that they were ready to condone the use of military sanctions. The resolution insisted emphatically that the League should 'use *all* the necessary measures provided by the Covenant' to prevent an attack on Abyssinia.⁵⁸ Though the text of the resolution did not elaborate on the point, those who drafted it were fully aware that through firm collective action against Italy they were hoping to do more than just check Mussolini's designs on North Africa. They sought, above all, to re-establish a sense of international law and order that would subsequently deter the far more menacing prospect of Nazi aggression. Their policy tried to deal with the threat to world peace as a whole and was, therefore, essentially the antithesis of that which the National government had appeared to be following at the Stresa Conference in March 1935. At this meeting Britain and France had tried, and at the time seemingly succeeded, in persuading Mussolini to co-operate with attempts to restrain Hitler.

With a firm policy now urged against Italy, Dalton strongly repented of his earlier fascination with Mussolini. Ever since he had served on the Italian Front during

⁵⁶ ACIQ memorandum, No 457A, July 1935. The identification of Noel-Baker as the author is from ACIQ minutes, 26 June 1935.

⁵⁷ *LPACR*, 1935, p.7. See also NCL minutes, 23 July 1935 for the decision to produce such a statement.

the war Dalton had held a sentimental attachment to the country. He had also met Mussolini in December 1932 and been not only impressed with his bold economic policies, but also somewhat overawed by the Duce himself.⁵⁹ He remained, of course, fully conscious of the primacy of the German threat. In his memoirs he recorded his belief that 'Italian fascism, just because it was Italian, was much less intense, more casual, and therefore less evil, than German Nazism.' He realised that 'Italy, standing alone' could never 'be the grim threat that Germany soon would be'.⁶⁰

When Citrine introduced the three Executives' resolution to the TUC meeting at Margate between 2-6 September he too followed this reasoning. He contended that action had to be taken against Italy. Mussolini had 'already put himself outside every moral principle...abrogated every feeling and sentiment of decency in his own country', and prevented 'his citizens exercising any restraint on his unbridled will'.⁶¹ Citrine argued, therefore, that the 'only way of dealing with a bully...is by the use of force...the collective force of the nations who are determined to preserve the peace of the world'. Moral resolutions were 'no good', indeed they were 'wasted on Mussolini'. Military sanctions were 'a very important point in our policy'. The nations in the League would have to 'put at the disposal of the League of Nations such a measure of force of a military, naval and aerial character as may be necessary to make the sanctions effective' – the very policy that had been endorsed by a clear majority of the 12 million respondents to the Peace Ballot.⁶² Citrine took pains, however, to present the demand for strong collective action against Italy as a way of preventing a

⁵⁸ TUC General Council minutes, 3,4 September 1935; Dalton, *Fateful Years* p. 66.

⁵⁹ Dalton diary, 30 December 1932 [Pimlott, *Political Diary*, pp. 172-3]; Dalton, *Fateful Years*, pp. 33-5; Pimlott, *Dalton*, pp. 214-5.

⁶⁰ Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p.41.

⁶¹ *TUCAR*, 1935, p. 368.

⁶² *Ibid*, pp.348-9.

world-wide spiral of aggression. He described vividly how fascism was on 'the warpath'.⁶³ Now even the possibility of war with Italy was preferable to letting Mussolini's aggression proceed unchecked:

I overheard a delegate say at the commencement of my speech "It means war". It may mean war, but that is the thing we have to face. We have to face the fact that there is no real alternative now left to us but the applying of sanctions involving in all possibility, war. But I say this. If we fail now, if we go back now, war is absolutely certain. I ask you what will happen to Germany if Italy can break through her treaties, if Italy can treat with contempt the nations of the world who have plighted their word to preserve peace? Do you think we are going to restrain a Hitler Germany from carrying out its projected plan of attack upon Soviet Russia?...If we fail now...international anarchy will reign supreme.⁶⁴

The majority NEC-NCL vision of how the League would work to stabilise the international order went further than trying to provide an object lesson to Hitler. In sharp contrast to the pacifists and the Socialist League, they placed a great deal of faith in the League. They wanted to see it vindicate itself in the Italian-Abyssinian dispute so it would have the credibility to extend its jurisdiction and investigate the underlying causes of wars, which it assumed were connected to economic inequality. Since Hitler, no less than Mussolini, had expressed an interest in acquiring colonial territories, it was assumed in order to have access to raw materials and additional markets, the relevance of this facet of their policy was obvious. Bevin in particular stands out as someone who fully appreciated its importance. It was due to his influence that the resolution drafted just prior to the Margate TUC concluded with two paragraphs explaining the economic causes of wars and striving for a solution.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid, p. 348.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp.349-50.

⁶⁵ Bullock, *Bevin*, p.563.

Moreover, when he spoke at Margate Bevin elaborated on the demand for 'the League of Nations to summon a World Economic Conference and to place on its agenda the international control of the sources and supply of raw materials'. The underlying causes of war were clear to Bevin. Sanctions would only be effective if they prohibited access to the 25 or so basic materials which supplied all the metals and power for both industry and war. He reasoned that if 'these materials were internationally controlled' and available 'by purchase and not by conquest, 90 per cent of the world causes of war would be entirely removed'. Economic nationalism, which Mussolini was practising in trying to seize territory in order to exploit its resources, had to be outlawed. Unless this was done 'immediately you settle the Abyssinian question and stop Mussolini, then tomorrow you have a quarrel with another nation over raw materials or over another sphere of influence'. Britain, he contended, even ought to offer a lead and develop the Empire under the auspices of the League into a 'stage of world organisation'.⁶⁶

Throughout the summer the advocates of a sanctionist League had been securing support for their stance. In particular the block votes of the trade unions had been placed firmly behind the sanctionist line ahead of the debate at the annual conference. This process had begun at the Biennial Conference of the largest union – the TGWU - in the summer. Here Bevin had defended Labour's League of Nations foreign policy, though not yet, of course, one that specifically demanded economic and military sanctions against Italy in the face of a number of leftist attacks. He had won conference approbation for his approach through what his biographer has termed 'a common sense argument' for the League. Bevin had explained how he himself had

⁶⁶ *TUCAR*, 1935, pp. 354-7.

hesitated for a long time before signing *War and Peace*. He had only been convinced to sign by the realisation that the League, with all its imperfections, was the only alternative to a return to the old diplomacy. He had then made clear his support for the use of force to uphold the Covenant by repeating his analogy with 'a man entering a union'.⁶⁷

This process of securing trade union backing for sanctionist action against Italy had been completed during the debate on the matter at the TUC meeting on 5 September. Here Bevin and Citrine faced opposition to the three Executives' resolution foreshadowing that which would follow at the Labour party conference. In all, seven delegates spoke against the resolution and this prolonged the debate beyond its allotted time. Although one of the delegates, Arthur of the Mineworkers, held pacifist objections to sanctions, most of those opposing the resolution voiced the leftist objections to trusting the 'capitalist' and 'imperialist' National government with the power to operate sanctions. This was, for instance, the tack taken by Scollan of the Distributive and Allied Workers, who repeatedly heckled Citrine as he replied to the arguments levelled against a sanctionist line.⁶⁸ However, by the time these objections had been dismissed and the resolution overwhelmingly endorsed, the Trade Union block votes were positioned firmly behind the policy of sanctions against Italy.

Now throughout September the advocates of a sanctionist League prepared for a fight at the party conference as their opponents – the pacifists and the left – expressed their dissent to the three Executives' resolution. Despite having secured TUC support for a policy of sanctions, Citrine clearly felt that the issues at stake were so manifestly crucial that he was willing to consult the National government privately

⁶⁷ TGWU Biennial Delegate Conference, 1935, pp. 248-55, quoted in Bullock, *Bevin*, pp. 558-9.

about them. He revealed in his autobiography that he was receptive to overtures from Baldwin, on 13 September 1935, to consult the TUC about rearmament, and he was disappointed when nothing came of these plans.⁶⁹ Now Dalton began openly to attack Cripps. While he claimed to respect the personal views of Lansbury and Ponsonby which 'have been well known and consistently held for many years', he did not treat Cripps – whom he perceived as his most threatening rival – so leniently. He accused Cripps of inconsistency, saying that he had only indicated his objection to party policy at the beginning of September. He lambasted Cripps's view that 'this country should stand impotently aside in this crisis [and] violate its treaty obligations under the Covenant of the League' because it would signal 'all clear' to Mussolini and was 'in effect... pro-fascist and pro-war',⁷⁰ even though the views propounded by the pacifists were surely equally objectionable.

Morrison and Greenwood now joined the ranks of those advocating the use of sanctions. They both held prominent positions in the party, not least through their status as ex-ministers, but had shown little interest in foreign policy over the last few years. Greenwood had been engrossed in efforts, through the Policy Research Committee, to reformulate economic policy.⁷¹ Morrison had devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy to the London County Council (LCC), especially after he became its leader when Labour won control of the Council in March 1934.⁷² Now,

⁶⁸ *TUCAR*, 1935, pp. 352-69.

⁶⁹ Citrine, *Men and Work*, pp. 353-4. Citrine left for Russia the following day, leaving the matter in the hands of Bevin, who apparently did not feel inclined to pursue it.

⁷⁰ *The Times*, 23 September 1935.

⁷¹ Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, p. 36.

⁷² H. Morrison, *An Autobiography* (1960), chs. 10, 11; B. Donoghue & G. W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (1973), chs. 13, 14.

however, they began to speak on behalf of the sanctionist line and added to the sense of impending intra-party struggle in the weeks before the party conference.⁷³

⁷³ See, for example, *Manchester Guardian*, 16 September 1935, for one of Greenwood's statements advocating sanctions against Italy.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PARTY CONFERENCE

By the time the Labour party conference met at the Dome in Brighton on 30 September, the two million block votes held by the trade unions, particularly Bevin's TGWU, had of course ensured the overall result of the debate on 'Italy and Abyssinia'. However, what could not have been anticipated, even in a context where news of Italy's attack on Abyssinia was expected at any time (and indeed came on 2 October), was the dramatic fashion in which the objections of the Socialist League, and especially those of the pacifist Lansbury, would be decisively checked.

Dalton introduced the three Executives' resolution on the morning of 1 October and explained the reasoning behind the statement. In an attempt to temper opposition to a controversial policy, he presented it as the logical culmination of the *War and Peace* resolution that had been endorsed at conference the previous year. He made it clear that 'strong collective action', involved the League in the possible use of military force alongside economic and financial sanctions, arguing that if 'Mussolini be so lunatic as to resist the united League of Nations, then so be it'. He argued that concerted action against Italy would work to re-establish a sense of international order in these dangerous times. While the imposition of sanctions against Italy might involve the possibility of war, by contrast 'the scrapping of sanctions as a reserve force behind international law means war, and war soon, and war in a far more terrible form than even a war between Italy and Abyssinia'. Dalton also touched on the dilemma of how this policy could be distinguished from that of the National government which had made a 'death-bed repentance' to the principles of the League

‘largely because of the Peace Ballot’ – which, he claimed, had shown that support for the Labour movement was ‘great and growing’. Unable to make any criticism of the government’s current public position, he had to argue that through its earlier inaction over the Sino-Japanese dispute it had led Mussolini to believe that he could proceed by force of arms thinking that ‘what was right for Japan could not be wrong for him’.

Dalton also set the caustic tone of the debate by pre-empting the arguments of both Cripps and Lansbury, and charging them both with inconsistency. He noted that in the House of Commons on 1 August Lansbury had asked the government without reservation ‘to stand loyally by the League Covenant and all that it implies’. Similarly he recalled how Cripps, speaking retrospectively about the Sino-Japanese dispute on 11 March 1935, had claimed that a Labour government would have co-operated with other nations under the auspices of the League of Nations to check aggression, initially by economic pressure and ‘by armaments if necessary’.¹

Cripps followed Dalton and launched directly into a criticism of the resolution. He repeated his argument that with the ‘capitalist’ and ‘imperialist’ National government in power the ‘central factor in our decision must turn, not so much upon what we as a country should, or should not do, but upon who is in control of our actions’. While he detested Mussolini, he contended that he could not ignore the ‘sordid history of capitalist deception’, in particular the ‘empty and hollow excuses of 1914’. He implied that the NEC-NCL line was contradictory by asking how they thought the Conservative party, ‘whose criminal record has been so admirably painted by Hugh Dalton’, could be trusted with ‘the lives of the British workers’. Dismissing Dalton’s ‘theory of death-bed repentance’ he contended that the ‘capitalist leopard

¹ *LPACR*, 1935, p.153-6.

cannot change its spots...even if he does colour wash them to conceal them from the workers'. Undoubtedly directing his remarks at Dalton and his allies, he added that it was 'not our job to help in that concealment; it is our job to expose it'. He conceded that his views had changed. It had now become clear that the League was nothing 'but the tool of the satiated imperialist powers', really an 'International Burglars Union' with which, Cripps prophetically warned, Mussolini was likely to 'drive a satisfactory bargain...even though they have momentarily turned policemen'. Despite his passing reference to 'working-class sanctions', Cripps contended that it was 'unfortunate, tragic, but inescapably true, that the British workers cannot at this moment be effective in the international political field'. Instead he asked the movement to devote its whole energies 'to the defeat of...capitalism and imperialism...in this country'.²

Next Ponsonby stated the pacifist case and endorsed unilateral disarmament. He also asserted that collective security through the League would necessarily be ineffective. With self-interested nations you 'cannot get unanimity', he argued, and so sanctions would merely 'aggravate the situation'.³ William Mellor, of the Socialist League, then spoke in support of Cripps's arguments. He asked conference to remember that 'the positive action of fighting your enemy at home is greater in value than the negative disaster of defending your home enemy abroad'.⁴

Attlee followed these speakers and set out to undermine their arguments on behalf of the three Executives. He dismissed pacifist 'non-resistance' as a 'personal attitude', saying it was not a 'possible policy for people with responsibility'. And he attempted to demonstrate the absurdity of the Socialist League's objection to sanctions

² Ibid, pp. 156-8.

³ Ibid, pp. 160-1.

⁴ Ibid, p. 172.

so long as a 'capitalist' and 'imperialist' government was in power, by arguing that if a Socialist government were in power 'the capitalist and imperialist can say just the same thing'. The most revealing part of his speech, however, was when he clarified what the Labour party meant, in practice, when it spoke of 'military' sanctions. The advocates of sanctions did not want the League forces 'to make war on Mussolini and stop him'. But they were prepared for the scenario that 'economic sanctions may possibly provoke an attack from Mussolini'.⁵ Thus far the debate followed an unspectacular course. It was only with Lansbury's speech that events began to take a turn for the dramatic.

When Lansbury rose to speak he had been given a 'tumultuous reception' as the whole conference sang 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow'.⁶ A great sentimental attachment to Lansbury pervaded the Labour movement; the veteran politician was well respected for his efforts to restore party morale after 1931 and with his commitment to minority causes – feminism as well as pacifism – was also seen as the conscience of the movement. Lansbury proceeded to outline the dilemma he faced as a Christian pacifist and leader of the Labour party – a 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde position'. He had, at times, expressed the views of the party but at others his personal belief that 'force never will bring permanent peace'. Now, however, he was convinced that the movement was 'making a terrible mistake' and spoke of his alternative plans for unilateral disarmament and for economic and Christian appeasement that would involve Britain putting its Empire at 'the service of mankind'. He did not gloss over the implications of his pacifist viewpoint, arguing that so far as military sanctions were concerned he could 'not see the difference between mass murder organised by

⁵ Ibid, pp. 173-4.

the League, or mass murder organised between individual nations'. He ended his speech in powerful, suitably Christian, terms:

If mine were the only voice in this conference, I would say in the name of the faith I hold, the belief I have that God intended us to live peaceably and quietly with one another, if some people do not allow us to do so, I am ready to stand as the early Christians did, and say, "This is our faith, this is where we stand, and, if necessary, this is where we will die".

Lansbury had stressed at the outset that he would 'not consider an expression of opinion hostile to my continuance as leader as anything more than natural and perfectly friendly'. He recognised that the conference was constitutionally unable to deal with the question of parliamentary leadership, and so had called a meeting of the Parliamentary Executive for the following week.⁷ Even so as Lansbury sat down Bevin walked to the platform in a mood of barely concealed anger.

Bevin had spent a lifetime in the trade union movement, faithfully observing its ethic of loyalty to committee decisions, and now launched straight into an attack on Lansbury's conflict of loyalties between party and conscience. He asserted that it was now 'rather late' for him to make his objections known and in a now infamous reproach claimed that it was 'placing the Executive and the Movement in an absolutely wrong position to be taking your conscience round from body to body asking to be told what you ought to do with it'.⁸ At this point there was an outcry from many parts of the hall,⁹ but Bevin did not back down and went on to present a case for Lansbury's disloyalty. He claimed that Lansbury had never made any objection to

⁶ Postgate, *Lansbury*, pp. 301-2.

⁷ *LPACR*, 1935, pp. 175-7

⁸ Some accounts claim that Bevin used the phrase 'hawking your conscience'. See, for instance, Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p. 69; Citrine, *Men and Work*, p. 352.

⁹ Bullock, *Bevin*, p. 568.

War and Peace as it was being drafted and finally accepted, nor had he even voiced his dissent at the meeting of the three Executives at Margate. In this respect Bevin also criticised Cripps, who had not made his case clear at Southport or at the critical meeting at Margate. He again made his attack decidedly personal, revealing a dislike of 'intellectuals' that had no doubt been reinforced when he was passed over in favour of Wise to become chairman of the Socialist League in 1932. Pointedly he argued that:

People have been on this platform talking about the destruction of capitalism. The middle classes are not doing too badly as a whole under capitalism and fascism. The thing that is being wiped out is the Trade Union movement.

Bevin concluded his speech by comparing the actions of Lansbury and Cripps with those of MacDonald in 1931 whose 'great crime... was that he never called in his party'. Indeed, he was as emphatic now as he had been in the aftermath of August 1931 that the trade union view should ultimately prevail in the party. His view (which he shared with Citrine) that the party was merely the political wing of the trade union movement could not have been clearer. He asserted that 'our predecessors formed this party. It was not Keir Hardie who formed it, it grew out of the bowels of the Trades Union Congress'.¹⁰

As soon as Bevin had finished Lansbury tried to respond, only to find that the microphones had already been switched off. Among the members of the NEC who had refused to accept his resignation only Morrison gave Lansbury any support,

¹⁰ *LPACR*, 1935, pp. 177-80. L.Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 31, considers this a classic confrontation between the leaders of the trade unions and the parliamentary party.

saying to him 'Stand by your beliefs, George' as he left the platform.¹¹ Morrison's biographers do not account for this particular incident, but they do stress that with his attention largely directed elsewhere, his understanding of foreign policy was decidedly 'superficial'.¹² Perhaps this was why he evidently did not feel so strongly about Lansbury's actions as some of his colleagues.

In any case, the debate continued the following day with Morrison winding up on behalf of the National Executive. He made a rather conciliatory speech, in which he called for tolerance towards those 'who have doubts' about the application of financial, economic and military sanctions, revealing that he himself had been a conscientious objector during the Great War.¹³ However, after Bevin's bellicose speech the debate had, in effect, been concluded. Dalton described how Bevin had 'hammered him (Lansbury) to death'.¹⁴ M.A.(Molly) Hamilton, one of the delegates present, later recalled that Bevin had 'compelled a naturally sentimental body to see an issue in larger than personal terms'. His attack on Lansbury had conveyed a sense of the 'responsibility of the issue itself' and this had 'carried the conference'.¹⁵ To be sure, the passage of the three Executives' resolution by 2,168,000 to 177,000 was a conclusive endorsement of a sanctionist League policy.¹⁶ A considerably smaller number of dissenting votes had been cast than in the previous year when 673,000 had opposed *War and Peace*. On 4 October the NCL made a statement to the conference asking for the immediate recall of Parliament 'in order that the government should inform the House of Commons what steps they have taken, and propose to take

¹¹ Postgate, *Lansbury*, p. 304.

¹² Donoghue & Jones, *Morrison*, p. 249. Morrison, *Autobiography*, does not give any explanation of his actions.

¹³ *LPACR*, 1935, pp. 190-3.

¹⁴ Dalton, *Fateful Years* p.69.

¹⁵ Quoted in Bullock, *Bevin*, p. 569.

through the League in order to bring hostilities to an end'.¹⁷ Lansbury's resignation as party leader the following week was a foregone conclusion, as most of the press made clear.¹⁸ Just as in 1914 the party leader, at odds with the majority of the NEC and the TUC General Council, had been effectively deposed.

¹⁶ *LPACR*, 1935, p. 193.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 1935, p. 242.

¹⁸ See, for instance, *News Chronicle*, 2, 3 October 1935.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of the party conference debate on Italy and Abyssinia marked the critical juncture in the development of the Labour movement's foreign policy in the 1930s. Thereafter armed collective security superseded disarmament as Labour's overriding foreign policy objective. It had accepted the view taken by the majorities on the NEC and NCL that it might prove necessary to resist the dictators with military force. The pacifist and leftist objections to this course had been conclusively defeated. Initially the impression of disunity following the party conference inhibited the party's performance at the general election that had been shrewdly called by Baldwin to exploit the situation. Moreover, it was not until July 1937 that Labour technically confirmed its support for armed collective security when the PLP ceased to oppose the National government's rearmament programme. Nevertheless, 'Cato's' assertion about the importance of the debate concluded at the Dome in Brighton holds. In the dramatic atmosphere of summer 1940 its co-authors simplified the story considerably, but unlike later interpretations were correct in asserting that Labour's decisive turning point had occurred in 1935, not 1937, 1938 or 1940. This was when the party had embarked on the road that led to its gradual coalescence with the Conservative anti-appeasers from late 1938 and culminated in its acceptance of office in Churchill's May 1940 coalition, fully rejuvenated after its political marginalisation between 1931-5.

The overwhelming endorsement of a sanctionist League policy at the party conference in 1935 signified that the forces of both pacifism and leftist dissent had been decisively suppressed. The defeat of these two factions was a considerable

achievement for Dalton, Bevin, Citrine and Attlee, who went on to dominate the party for a generation – which is why October 1935 can rightly be seen as a watershed. The pacifist strain ran deep in the *pacifistic* Labour party. As the events of 1933-5 demonstrated, individuals, even leaders, holding pacifist views were not merely tolerated but respected. It was no coincidence that Ponsonby, despite his impassioned advocacy of humanitarian pacifism, did not feel inclined to resign before September 1935. Nor was it surprising that none of the executive bodies - the NEC, NCL or PLP – asked Lansbury to stand down before the party conference. The majority in the party did not share the pacifist conviction that any use of force violated the dignity of human life. They did, however, hold beliefs that inclined them to sympathise with the pacifists within their ranks. The coalition of interests within the Labour movement was held together by its common commitment to domestic social reform, and this was generally thought to require a peaceful international environment. At its simplest it inspired the belief that expenditure on arms was inimical to the achievement of any substantial social improvement at home. Moreover, since the Great War a deep suspicion of the morality of private arms manufacture had permeated the whole party. They held that the practice inclined the powerful capitalist munitions firms – ‘the merchants of death’ - to stimulate arms races in order to increase their own profits. Indeed, Attlee had moved a PLP resolution demanding the abolition of private arms manufacture in November 1934.¹ Nevertheless, pacifism was destroyed as an effective force within the Labour party in 1935. Under the pressure of a now rapidly deteriorating international environment, the wider pacifist movement, particularly Sheppard’s Peace Pledge Union (PPU), in which Lansbury became prominent,

¹ *HC Deb*, 293, cols. 1293-1304, 8 November 1934.

continued to campaign for unilateral disarmament. However, in contrast to the years before 1935 pacifist views, and those holding them, were now discredited within the Labour party.

The censuring of the Socialist League at the 1935 party conference was equally significant. The League's leaders, especially Cripps but also Mellor, echoed sentiments that struck a chord with a substantial section of the party. Most of the party would have nothing of their rhetoric about an impending fascist take-over in Britain. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of 1931 a deep distrust of capitalist parties did pervade the Labour ranks, and it was this that Cripps had tried to mobilise in campaigning against allowing the National government to operate sanctions.

Nevertheless, in the short term the Labour party's decisive shift towards support for a sanctionist League policy hindered the party's performance in the 1935 general election. The passionate debate at the party conference that culminated in Bevin's savage denunciation of Lansbury had created the impression that the party was 'hopelessly divided'.² Following Lansbury's resignation as party leader on 8 October and his replacement by Attlee, Baldwin moved to exploit the situation. On 19 October he called the general election for three weeks time.³ On the central issue of the day – foreign policy – Labour now struggled to distinguish their stance from that of the National government. Both espoused support for the use of sanctions through the League of Nations to check Mussolini's aggression. On 7 and 11 October the Council of the League of Nations and then its Assembly had declared Italy an aggressor in violation of the Covenant. As Mowat perceptively noted, Baldwin 'had stolen their [the Labour party's] clothes, and they could only protest that he would

² *The Times*, 3 October 1935.

never wear them'.⁴ The National government's manifesto declared that the 'League of Nations will remain as heretofore the keystone of British foreign policy', and pledged that so far as the Italian-Abyssinian dispute was concerned 'there will be no wavering in the policy we have hitherto pursued'.⁵ In turn, the Labour party's manifesto could only condemn the National government's 'attempt to exploit for partisan ends a situation of grave international anxiety', yet reaffirm that it too stood 'firmly for the collective peace system'. Throughout the election campaign, the Labour party was forced to adopt a defensive posture and to respond to the National government, rather than elaborating on their own policies.⁶ The National government, on the other hand, with the dashing Anthony Eden as Minister for League of Nations Affairs, was able to emphasise Labour's disarray. Many of its candidates followed the line of its manifesto, which had stated that the Labour party was 'hopelessly divided on the most important points in foreign policy'.⁷ Greenwood, for one, tried to turn this argument against the National government and its supporters, by stressing the differences in emphasis between the speeches of Baldwin and Churchill on the issues of rearmament and the League of Nations. His arguments, however, lacked the same pungency. In fact, the Conservative party had resolved its own greatest cause of internal discord with passage of the Government of India Act. The Labour party's electoral prospects had also been directly undermined by the loss of Lansbury as party leader. It was understood that Attlee – Labour's fourth leader since 1931 – was only holding the position on a temporary basis, pending the expected return to parliament of senior

³ T. Stannage, *Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition* (1980), pp. 125-7.

⁴ Mowat, *Britain between the Wars*, pp. 553-4.

⁵ Stannage, *Baldwin*, p. 155.

⁶ *Ibid* pp. 138, 142.

⁷ Quoted *ibid*, pp. 139, 157.

party figures at the next election. He was also a little known figure outside Westminster, who in sharp contrast with Baldwin, was unlikely to hold much personal appeal to the wider electorate.

In the event, Labour won 154 seats in the November general election, leaving the National government with 429 seats, of which 387 were Conservatives. Although the party had almost tripled the 59 seats it held prior to the dissolution of parliament, the result overall was disappointing. On 28 October Dalton – who along with Morrison was one of those who was returned to the Commons – had considered that Labour could realistically expect to win as many as 240 seats.⁸

It was only after the general election, as the National government's commitment to upholding League sanctions against Italy appeared to waver, that the tremendous implications of Labour's shift to support for armed security began to become apparent. Following the election, the party chose Attlee as its permanent leader after a three-way contest with Morrison and Greenwood. Labour now criticised the National government for accepting, without protest, the work of the Committee of 18 set up to co-ordinate the imposition of sanctions as it decided on measures which fell short of the complete and general boycott stipulated by Article XVI. It had introduced an arms embargo, a comprehensive financial sanction, but only a limited embargo on certain important commodities – crucially excluding oil. In the House of Commons on 5 December, for instance, Dalton attacked the National government for 'not doing its full duty in this matter'. The embargo did not include oil, which Dalton

⁸ Dalton diary, 28 October 1935 [Pimlott, Political Diary, p. 191].



argued was the 'most indispensable of all the modern materials of war', whose restriction would enable the League to 'stop Mussolini's war'.⁹

After the revelation of the Hoare-Laval pact on 10 December, Labour's criticism of the government's flight from the League intensified. The foreign secretary had agreed a plan with his French counterpart that asked Abyssinia to concede approximately half its territory to Italy. Amid public uproar Baldwin repudiated the pact on 19 December and Hoare was forced to resign, being replaced by Anthony Eden.¹⁰ Attacking the government for attempting to destroy 'the whole foundation of collective security',¹¹ Labour now became the clear pro-League party. In the first six months of 1936, with the Italian forces looking increasingly like being victorious, it continued to push for the imposition of stronger sanctions, particularly on oil. Indeed, the party continued to make these demands even after the Italian forces had entered Addis Ababa and Haile Selassie had fled his country in early May.¹² Labour was similarly critical of the government's decision to abandon sanctions, announced peremptorily by Neville Chamberlain who described them as 'the very midsummer of madness' and then formally by Eden in the House of Commons on 18 June.¹³

As a result of the party's determined stance in favour of armed collective security, Labour was beginning to align with Churchill – the great villain of the General Strike. It now became clear that in October 1935 Labour had made the decisive shift which, when prompted by international events in 1938 – the Austrian

⁹ *HC Deb*, 307, cols. 324-7, 5 December 1935.

¹⁰ *HC Deb*, 307, cols. 2030-1, 2035, 19 December 1935.

¹¹ *HC Deb*, 307, col. 2018, 19 December 1935.

¹² For Dalton making such demands see *HC Deb*, 311, cols. 1722-8, 6 May 1936. For similar comments by Attlee and Morrison see *Daily Herald*, 11 May 1936 and *Forward*, 16 May 1936.

¹³ Chamberlain made this statement at the 1900 Club on 10 June, cited in Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, p. 140. For Eden's announcement of the withdrawal of sanctions, see *HC Deb*, 313, col. 1201, 18 June

Anschluss and the Czech crisis - would lead to the tentative beginnings of the cross-party alliance that was completed in 1940. Following Churchill's outspoken support for collective security following the revelation of the Hoare-Laval pact and after Hitler, in flagrant violation of both Versailles and Locarno, occupied the demilitarised zone in the Rhineland on 7 March 1936, Attlee welcomed him to the pro-League ranks as 'a repentant sinner'.¹⁴ Later in the year major figures from the TUC, notably Citrine, joined Churchill's campaign for 'Arms and the Covenant', which combined explicit support for the League with demands for large-scale disarmament. However, the campaign fell apart in December shortly after Churchill and Citrine had shared a platform at the Albert Hall – though not because of differences over foreign policy - but because Churchill's interest was deflected to the Abdication, and the idea of forming a King's party.¹⁵

At this stage, however, Labour still had to clarify its support for armed collective security by giving approval to the National government's rearmament programme. For the time being, Eden could justifiably accuse Labour of professing 'to support the League with horse, foot and artillery', but of only supporting it in reality 'with threats, insults and perorations'.¹⁶ Likewise, Chamberlain could dismiss Labour's policy as 'defiance without defence'. Throughout 1936 Dalton, Citrine and Bevin continued their struggle to convince the PLP to support rearmament. Nevertheless, the endemic suspicion of the National government, which had been greatly bolstered by the revelation of the Hoare-Laval pact, prevented the majority of

1936. For criticism by Greenwood see *HC Deb*, 313, col. 1219, 18 June 1936, and for that by Dalton see *HC Deb*, 313, cols. 1714-5, 23 June 1936.

¹⁴ *H.C.Deb*, 310, col. 1531, 26 March 1936.

¹⁵ J.F.Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, pp. 171-2.

¹⁶ *HC Deb*, 311, col. 1736, 6 May 1936.

the party from accepting their arguments. In early March a series of meetings of Labour's three Executives were convened to discuss the position that the PLP should take towards the National government's proposals for a £330 million rearmament plan that had been announced in the White Paper of 2 March. Dalton, Bevin and Citrine spoke passionately on behalf of Labour support for rearmament. However, the contrary view, voiced by the powerful grouping of Attlee, Morrison and Greenwood, prevailed. Dalton was exasperated. He thought the party was 'more agin' our own Government than agin' Hitler'.¹⁷ In the House of Commons on 9 March Attlee duly opposed the National government's plans. He repeated the arguments he had used since 1934 and stressed that Labour would approve of the maintenance of such defence forces as were 'necessary and consistent' with membership of the League, but did not believe that this was a consideration that the National government took into account.¹⁸ As Morrison put it, the gist of the Labour party's policy was to 'condemn the whole foreign policy, practically speaking, of this government since it came into office'.¹⁹ Dalton's view, however, was that this approach to defence policy 'failed to face realities'.²⁰ In the absence of a genuinely international League police force, a commitment to a sanctionist League necessarily entailed support for national rearmament. From a post-war perspective, Attlee himself castigated the PLP's practice as 'unwise and pedantic'.²¹

In July Dalton was again unsuccessful in an attempt to persuade the PLP to abstain rather than vote against the National government's service estimates. On 27

¹⁷ NEC minutes, 2,3,4 March 1936; TUC General Council minutes, 2,3,4 March 1936; Dalton diary, 2,3,4 March 1936.

¹⁸ *HC Deb*, 309, col. 1851, 9 March 1936.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, cols. 2073, 79.

²⁰ Dalton diary, 2,3,4 March 1936.

²¹ C.R. Attlee, *As it Happened* (1954), p. 98.

July when the vote was taken, Dalton, and a few others, notably the Co-operative leader, A.V.Alexander, invoked the conscience clause, usually monopolised by the pacifists, and abstained from the vote in order to register their dissent from the party line. The PLP stressed that their vote against an Estimate was not a vote for the abolition of the service, but rather a vote in opposition to the policy of which the Estimate was an expression. Nevertheless, the widely respected view of Grey that 'Great armaments lead to war' still found a receptive audience in the Labour party, and this underlay some of their reticence to accept rearmament organised on a distinctly national basis. As late as 1937 Attlee did not 'believe that the entry into a competition in arms will give security', but that, in contrast, 'it is heading straight to the disaster of another world war'.²²

Moreover, a document produced by the NCL for the party conference in October 1936 failed to clarify Labour's logically incompatible foreign and defence policies. This reaffirmed that Labour's policy was to maintain such defence forces as were consistent with Britain's responsibility as a member of the League. It also stressed, however, that because of the National government's record, the Labour party could not 'accept responsibility for a purely competitive armament policy'. If the document's meaning was not clear enough, Attlee emphasised in the course of the debate that there 'is no suggestion here that we should support the government's rearmament programme'.²³

It was only on 22 July 1937, that Dalton managed to persuade the PLP, by 45 votes to 29, to abstain rather than vote against the government's service estimates. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, with its confrontation between

²² C.R.Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective* (1937), pp. 270-1.

Franco's fascists and the Republican forces, played a large part in bringing about this change of stance. The Republican cause greatly stirred the party's emotions – as was apparent from the proceedings at the 1936 party conference in Edinburgh.²⁴ The Labour party had initially endorsed the National government's policy of Non Intervention. However, on 28 October 1936, it formally began to demand arms for the Republicans. Dalton recorded how this decision helped him to secure PLP support for rearmament. He described that after demanding 'Arms for Spain', it became 'more and more impossible...to justify a vote which, whatever pundits in parliamentary procedure might pretend, means to the plain man, "No Arms for Britain"'.²⁵ The change in PLP policy was important. It meant that Labour's defence policy was now consistent with its foreign policy. However, neither this decision, nor its formalisation in a policy document, *International Policy and Defence*, passed by the party conference on October 1937, constituted a fundamental change in party policy and a break with the past in the way that the party's emphatic embrace of armed collective security in 1935 had done.

Similarly, the overwhelming defeat of Cripps's demands for a Unity Campaign at the 1937 party conference merely completed the process of discrediting the Labour Left that had begun in earnest in October 1935. Since 1933 the CPGB and the ILP had been in favour of a United Front of all socialists to combat fascism and depose the National government. However, it was not until January 1937, when the impending world-wide struggle between socialism and fascism had been dramatised by the war in Spain, that the Socialist League decided to defy party policy and initiate

²³ *LPACR*, 1936, p. 206.

²⁴ Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, pp. 162-69, describes the emotional fervour that the Spanish Republican cause unleashed in many of the delegates at the 1936 party conference.

the Unity Campaign with the aim of convincing the Labour party to endorse just such a Front. By the end of March the NEC had ruled that any member of the Socialist League was ineligible for party membership from 1 June. The League dissolved itself in May, but Cripps continued to press the idea of a United Front. He spoke on its behalf at the party conference in October, but with the overwhelming vote in favour of the Executive's position, he abandoned the idea altogether shortly afterwards. Cripps's leftist threat to the moderate NEC-NCL line was at an end. To be sure, in January 1939 he began his 'Petition Campaign' for the creation of a Popular Front – an alliance of dissident Conservatives, Labour and Liberals – with electoral pacts at constituency level. However, the idea of a Popular Front was not exclusively, or even largely, an initiative from the Left. The NEC decided to expel Cripps in March – a decision that was endorsed at the Party conference in May. However, his expulsion was due to his persistent pursuit of his independent moves and disloyalty to the party line. He was by this stage actually moving in much the same direction as the rest of the party.²⁶

With its endorsement of armed collective security, Labour found itself, in the course of 1938, increasingly aligned with the dissident Tories – not just Churchill and Amery, but also Eden who resigned as foreign secretary in February 1938. Hitler's aspirations to extend the territorial boundaries of his Reich had become vividly clear, and Chamberlain, who had succeeded Baldwin as prime minister in June 1937, seemed willing to acquiesce in the hope of satisfying Hitler's appetite. The Labour party and the Conservative anti-appeasers both now argued that some sort of

²⁵ Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p. 133.

²⁶ Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, chs. 9, 10, 18, discusses Cripps's involvement with the plans for United and Popular Fronts.

‘collective’ check should be imposed on Hitler. Whereas Chamberlain was decidedly passive during February and March over Hitler’s plans to form an Anschluss with Austria, explicitly forbidden in the Versailles Treaty, Attlee demanded that the League act to restrain Hitler and Churchill advocated a Franco-British-Russian alliance.²⁷ Since these were the only great powers remaining in the largely discredited League, it was only the gloss on their policies that differed.

The Labour party and the Conservative anti-appeasers also took the same critical stance over Chamberlain’s attempts to appease Hitler’s demands for repatriation of the Sudeten Germans in a series of meetings at Berchtsgaden, Godesberg and finally Munich during September. The Labour party had demanded in early September that ‘the British government must leave no doubt in the mind of the German government that it will unite with the French and Soviet governments to resist any attack upon Czechoslovakia’.²⁸ After Chamberlain agreed to Hitler’s demands, with only the proviso that the German occupation take place in phases, Attlee asserted that Britain had suffered ‘one of the gravest diplomatic defeats’ in its history, in allowing Hitler to seize a ‘tremendous victory’.²⁹ The party was as critical as Churchill, who famously derided Chamberlain’s diplomacy:

One pound was demanded at the pistol’s point. When it was given, two pounds were demanded at the pistol’s point. Finally the Dictator consented to take £1 17s 6d. and the rest in promises of good will for the future.³⁰

²⁷ *HC Deb*, 333, cols. 54-5, 14 March 1938.

²⁸ *LPACR*, 1939, pp. 13-14. This demand was made in *Labour and the International Situation* – a declaration drafted by the three Executives before the TUC meeting in early September 1938.

²⁹ *H.C. Deb*, 339, col. 52, 3 October 1938.

³⁰ Quoted in Naylor, *Labour’s International Policy*, p. 253.

By this stage Labour was firmly pursuing the course that culminated in its refusal to join a coalition under Chamberlain in September 1939, followed by its agreement to join one under Churchill. Indeed, there had been a substantial movement for the creation of a cross-party coalition in October 1938. The Conservative, Harold Macmillan, approached Dalton on 3 October and arranged for him to meet with Churchill and Eden later that day.³¹ Attlee and Morrison expressed some sympathy to the idea, and Cripps was outright enthusiastic. Dalton later recalled that 'for a fleeting moment, it seemed possible that a large-scale Tory revolt against Chamberlain might change the whole political scene'.³² In the event, the idea of a cross-party alliance floundered largely due the reluctance of Eden, whose liberal image would have formed an essential link between the die-hard Tories and the Labour party.³³

Nevertheless, the important point is that none of these moves would have been possible if the party had not undergone a fundamental reconsideration of its foreign policy between 1933 and 1935, culminating in the debate at the 1935 party conference. The implications of this shift for subsequent British politics and policy are tremendous. Followed to its logical conclusion, if Labour had not decisively endorsed armed collective security in 1935 it might not have been strongly represented in Churchill's coalition, with Attlee as the wartime deputy prime minister. Labour might not then have won the 1945 general election, and the political landscape of post-war Britain might have assumed a very different character.

³¹ Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p. 199.

³² Ibid, p. 209.

³³ See Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, ch. 17.

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